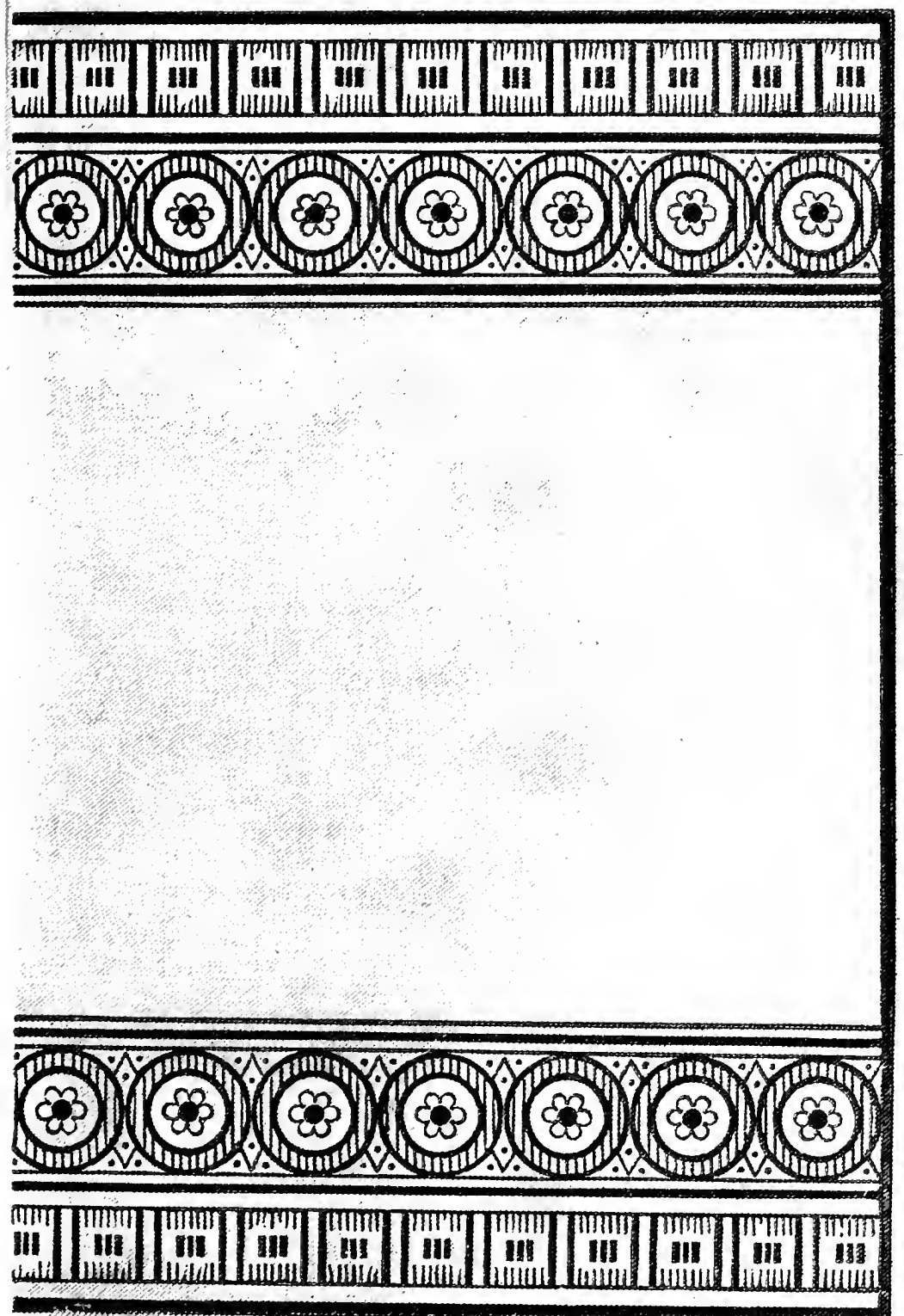

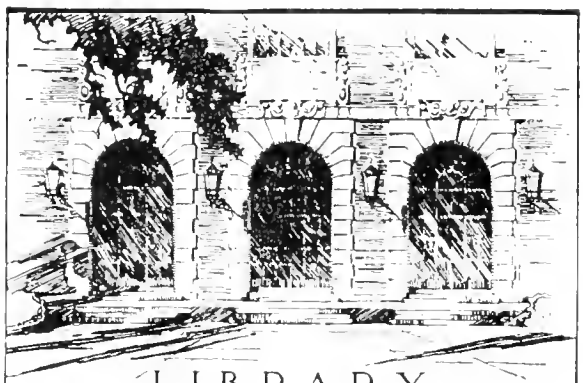

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# RING AND CORONET.

*A STORY OF CIRCUS LIFE.*

BY

"ARENA."

*IN THREE VOLUMES.*

VOL. II.

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# RING AND CORONET.

## CHAPTER I.

### THE DIAMOND EAR-RINGS.

It is the evening of that, to her, all-eventful Sunday when Nina became conscious of possessing a heart, at the very moment of losing it again for ever, and the young girl sits before her little casement window gazing pensively at the starlit sky.

The nights are cold now, so she has thrown her shawl carelessly round her; and, as she watches the pale new moon, whose silver crescent rises just above the trees, and listens to the soft murmuring lament the falling leaves are whispering to the chilly night wind that bears them gently to the earth,

a crowd of startling and bewildering thoughts flash through her troubled mind with lightning speed.

Downstairs Madame Giuseppina is sitting cosily by her comfortable fire enjoying a very hearty supper with her husband, Lisetta, and Jemima; but Nina's absence is completely disregarded, and no one thinks it worth while to notice it in any way.

But in the solitude of her chamber Nina tries to think over all the strange events of the day just gone. She is conscious of feeling a wild, fierce happiness that her madly beating heart is all too small and feeble to contain, that rushes in an uncontrollable torrent through her veins, making her every pulse throb with an acuteness almost painful in its intensity.

Can it be indeed true, she asks herself, that Caryll loves her? He, her hero, her idol! Caryll, in every way so superior to all she has ever seen, so different, so proud, so clever, and oh! so handsome!

Is it all really true? It is no dream, no glorious illusion but an actual fact, a positive reality.

And she? Does she indeed love him? Oh, yes! With her whole heart and soul. Well for her, poor child, if he but loved her half, nay, even one quarter so well.

In a few short hours, but since the morning, what a wonderful metamorphosis has fallen on her life, unfolding to her dazzled gaze a new, bright dream of untold happiness.

She feels crushed beneath the weight of her great joy. If she had but some kind friend in whom she might confide. Would that her dear, dear mother were with her now to advise and counsel her.

It is late that night before the sweet angel of sleep spreads her downy wings over Nina's restless little head, and when next morning she is awakened by the noisy chirping of her tiny feathered favourites, she feels wearied and listless, and her head aches terribly.

A few days after the mutual avowal of their love, Nina sees Caryll again.

The young man's passion is rapidly getting the better of his prudence and discretion.

He has little difficulty now in persuading Nina to turn aside for a short time into a quiet road along which they have walked and driven together on those happy Sunday afternoons.

In a field close by the road is a tree lying its length upon the grass. This serves them for a seat, and putting his arm round her slender waist Caryll draws Nina closer to his side, and the two fond lovers repeat those well-worn oft-told, yet ever welcome vows of love, as with fierce and passionate egotism he makes her blushingly confess how deeply, how truly she loves him.

"Nina, my darling Nina!" he says, gazing earnestly at the sweet innocent young face upturned to his, "in Heaven's name, do not deceive me! The love I ask of you must be strong enough to endure adversity, brave enough to encounter obstacles, to surmount difficulties. I ask you to surrender all for me: your home; the faces that from childhood you have been accustomed to see around you; your present friends and companions; associations, perhaps, most dear—all and everything, to link your life and fortunes with one who

is scarcely more than a stranger to you, but who loves you better than he loves himself, or all the world beside——"

"I trust you, Caryll," says Nina softly, putting her little hand confidingly in his. "I place my life, my welfare in your hands, because I love you."

He catches her rapturously to his heart, kissing the sweet lips that have breathed forth such welcome tidings.

"And so my own darling is willing to abandon all for her love's sake? Oh, Nina! never, never shall you have cause to repent your choice. From this time forth the whole study of my life shall be your happiness and welfare. I swear it."

It is so particularly easy to swear these sort of things, especially for lovers.

And Caryll swears complacently enough, perhaps, at the time, meaning everything he says, prepared, indeed, to swear a very great deal more if necessary, being like most men, utterly careless, utterly heedless of the future, provided only his present object be attained.

Presently Nina lifts her head with a little perplexed look.

"I wonder what madame will say when we tell her, Caryll? Do you know, I am afraid she will be angry."

"Then why tell her anything about it, little one? Of course she will be angry. Your services are of value to her in a business point of view. You represent a certain amount of money. She would not consider what was likely to be beneficial to you individually; she cares nothing whatever about your future happiness or prospects in life; you know it is so, Nina dearest. Trust me, pet, it will be far wiser to leave her in ignorance—for the present, at all events."

"But it would be deceitful not to tell her, Caryll. I must not let my love for you be a pretext for doing wrong or behaving ungratefully to Madame Giuseppina. It must not begin with deceit; then, then indeed, suspicion would cast its subtle blight upon it all too soon; and you, Caryll, even you, would begin to lose confidence in me. Who knows whether you might not one

day say: 'She did not hesitate to deceive her friends; in time she may also learn to deceive me?'"

"And this is then your vaunted love?" exclaims Caryll, with sudden change of manner, thrusting her from him, a scornful smile wreathing itself round the corners of his mouth, "your love that a minute ago was so brave that it would dare all for my sake, so trustful that it would place your life, your future in my hands. Child," he proceeds with some return to his former tenderness, "if your idea of love is still so pale and cold, better, far better we had never met; better, far better bid farewell to it at once. It is at best a sickly flickering flame, that the first breath of adversity will soon extinguish. The love I look for, the love I seek, the love I must have, is a widely different love to this."

He draws his arm from around her waist, leaving her free; and rising from her side, turns from her in anger as she thinks.

"What do you mean, Caryll?" she cries, rising too, and clinging to him, her face full of tender

reproach, her eyes brimming over with tears of earnest entreaty. "My love for you is no sickly flame, no weak or selfish passion. It is so true, so real, so strong, that for your sake I would willingly brave all hardship, poverty, danger, ay, even death itself, since life without you now," she adds with sweet but mournful tenderness, "would be worse even than death itself. But had I more to leave, more to regret, most cheerfully and gladly would I forsake all, Caryll, to follow you. How could I hope to be a true wife else?"

At these last words of hers Caryll winces, as if a serpent had stung him; instinctively he draws back from her, and turns away, she clinging to him still, with patient loving persistence.

"You are not angry with me, Caryll dearest?" she murmurs, in timid, pleading accents. "Tell me at least you are not angry with me."

Caryll catches her fondly to his heart.

"Angry with you, my darling; who could be angry with you?" he says; then resuming his seat by her side, he continues talking to her in his former caressing manner:

"It is, my little Nina, that I love you so well I cannot bear even the thought of parting with you; I feel I could not give you up now, my darling! and yet, you must trust me, you must have entire and complete confidence in what I say and do. Nina, you must consent to fly with me in a few short days, before Mr. Brayson leaves this place."

"It is very sudden," murmurs Nina, and her heart beats wildly with combined joy and fear. "But," she adds bravely, "I will do what you think best, Caryll; you shall see that I can and do trust you from my heart."

"And you shall never have cause to regret it," exclaims Caryll triumphantly, for he has gained his point at last. "And now, my darling, I must think over and arrange our future plans; when they are settled, if you prefer it, I will speak to Mr. and Madame Brayson."

For all that, Caryll does not in the least intend doing anything of the kind, he merely wishes to soothe and coax Nina's thoughts away from the subject for the present.

And then, whilst she is still meditating upon the rashness of the step he is proposing, he produces a glittering hoop of diamonds, which he places on that mysterious finger of her hand popularly supposed to be the engaged finger.

"This is to remind my darling of her promise," he says, kissing the little dimpled hand before releasing it. "And I have something else for her as well. I cannot bear to see you wear those common little silver ear-rings, child. I have brought you these to wear instead."

He shows her a pair of diamond ear-rings, single brilliants of the purest water, perfectly plain, with no setting save the fastening for the ears. As he holds them before her, they flash swift fiery gleams of living light.

Yet Nina heeds them not, she has not even seen them. She is looking with all absorbed attention at the glittering ring upon her hand, regarding it with feelings of hushed and silent awe, as if it were some mysterious forerunner and tangible foretaste of the future circlet of plain gold that will, so soon, even in a few short days (she thinks) for ever

bind her, heart, soul, and body, to her beloved Caryll.

With a tinge of disappointment in his tone, he says :

"I may place them in your ears, Nina, and take out these wretched little things, may I not?" the sound of his voice at once waking her from her sweet and all-engrossing reverie.

"How lovely! how beautiful!" she exclaims with unfeigned admiration. "I have often thought I should like to wear ear-rings like these. But they are too good, too valuable for me—at present, Caryll."

But Caryll quietly proceeds to remove the despised silver ear-rings and to fasten the flashing diamonds in her small shell-like ears.

"I dare not wear them whilst I remain with madame," protests Nina, as Caryll puts the despised silver ones into her hand. "I dare not even wear this ring," she adds, taking it reluctantly from her finger.

"But you must keep the ear-rings, Nina," cries Caryll. "They are not at all showy. They are

quite simple! You must not return my first love-gift. It would indeed be a bad omen."

"Do you believe in omens?" inquires Nina. "I thought men never did! You must not think me ungrateful; but you are a man, and you don't understand. Madame and Lisetta would notice them directly, and they would insist upon knowing all, and I should be obliged to tell them."

"Well, darling, keep them at all events; don't think of giving them back to me. A few short days, and my little Nina will be able to wear these and many more without fear or restraint."

Nina turns to take the ear-rings from her ears. As she does so her eyes glance carelessly in the direction of the road, and she starts, uttering a stifled exclamation of alarm. On the opposite side of the hedge that skirts the road, his head and shoulders only visible above the leafy screen, she sees a man, who has been watching this pretty pair of lovers for some little time past. And, to her dismay, Nina at once recognises him to be the insolent intruder of the wood, the supposed nobleman who is so constant a visitor at Brayson's

Circus; in short, no less a personage than Crosby St. Clair.

"Caryll! Look there! That horrid man! he has been watching us," she cries, seizing Caryll's arm.

Mr. St. Clair raises his hat with mocking courtesy, and with a slight shrug of the shoulders proceeds leisurely along the road out of their sight.

This little episode puts an end to the lovers' meeting for this day. As Nina hurriedly makes her way towards Peter's lodgings, her thoughts are still occupied with the unwelcome apparition she has just seen, and she remains forgetfully unconscious of the beautiful traitors that tremble in her ears, flashing swift rays of treacherous brilliancy as she trips rapidly along.

## CHAPTER II.

### OLD PETER'S STORY.

NINA arrives that day at her old friend Peter's house fully an hour behind her usual time; it is almost dusk when at last she makes her appearance, and Little Bobbles is busily engaged preparing the tea table at which, as a matter of course, Nina will preside.

Then Little Bobbles lights the lamp, and Nina goes on chattering gaily, laughing, and shaking her saucy little head, the tell-tale diamonds in her ears, whose existence she has quite forgotten, sending their glittering sparkles like poisoned arrows deep down into old Peter's aching heart.

A gloom seems all at once to settle on the little party, just now so gay.

From time to time the old man sighs heavily, and more than once Nina sees that the tears find their way into his eyes.

By-and-by when they are alone she brings her chair up close to his side, beginning to coax and caress him in her artless and innocent way.

She takes his hand—old, hard, and wrinkled, in her soft rosy palm, laying it gently against her velvet cheek.

Then she looks wistfully in the old man's face.

"Peter," she says soothingly, "you don't seem so well to-night. Now, don't shake your head—you've been trying to walk too soon, you've hurt your bad leg! Now, haven't you? Come, Peter, I can see plainly enough there is something the matter with you to-night."

"Yes, my dear child, you are right—there is indeed something the matter with me to-night, but it is not bodily pain. It is the sight of you, Nina, this evening, which most unwillingly carries me back to old memories and sorrows, all in the past long, long ago, but which come back to me to-

night with such fresh and startling reality that my old troubles wake again and make my heart ache bitterly indeed."

"I give you the heartache!" exclaimed Nina, deeply hurt. "The sight of me this evening brings your old troubles back to you! Oh, Peter, how can you say such cruel things?"

"Forgive me, dear child! As I have been foolish enough to say so much, have patience with me if I may make bold to say a little more. Promise not to be offended with your poor faithful old Peter, your father and mother's trusted, if humble servant."

The poor man's voice trembles with emotion, and at sight of his genuine distress, Nina's pettish impatience vanishes at once.

"Peter, I will not be angry with you again whatever you may say!" she cries, throwing her arms lovingly round the poor old man. "Only tell me why does the sight of me to-night make you feel melancholy and sad?"

"Look there?" and he points to the small chimney-glass over the mantelpiece. "Tell me

yourself, my child, is there not something unusual in your appearance to-night?"

Nina gives a sharp, quick glance in the direction in which Peter points. At once she sees the sparkling gems, flashing their mimic lightning as she moves. Instinctively she divines Peter's thoughts. A crimson blush sweeps over her face, a guilty feeling creeps into her mind, a dim consciousness of blame in some undefined way attaching itself to her.

Turning from the glass with a little drooping movement of her graceful head, she points to the till now forgotten ear-rings, as she asks timidly:

"Peter, is it these?"

Then she bends her head lower and lower until at last she buries her face in her hands.

And two large tears unseen by her, but bitter indeed to him, course slowly down the old man's cheeks.

And then she tells Peter the whole history of her love; showing him the ring, hiding nothing from him, little dreaming of the sharp stabs of

anguish her guileless narration inflicts upon Peter's sadly aching heart.

"Heaven in its mercy shield and protect you from harm," fervently ejaculates the old man at the conclusion of Nina's confession. "But, my dear child, I much distrust this fine young gentleman. He is not honest. There is something he wishes to conceal. I fear he is but trying to deceive and ensnare your innocent young heart. Perhaps he thinks you beneath him in station, and he is right. Gentlemen such as he may love girls in your position, but, Nina, they seldom marry them!"

"Peter!" exclaims the young girl, turning ashy pale, "what do you mean? Why do you speak to me like this?"

"My dear child, you may perhaps have heard that I once had a daughter. It is her memory that comes back to me so vividly to-night. At its earliest commencement her sad story somewhat resembled yours. Shall I tell you how it ended?"

The old man's voice falters, and his eyes fill with tears.

Nina, sitting quiet and pensive, inclines her head in faint token of assent, and after a pause of a few moments to regain self-possession the old man begins:

"I had a daughter once, a beautiful young girl. She was all I had in the world to love, for her mother died when she was but a few days old. Mercedes had been a good and faithful wife to me. She was a handsome woman, too, a Spaniard, and I had married her soon after joining the circus company that took me from my home.

"I was proud and fond of my young wife, but my love for her was nothing to the love with which I afterwards loved my only daughter, my darling Esther, or Estelle as they used to call her in the bills, for her simple name of Esther, which had been my mother's, was not half fine enough to please them.

"I don't believe a more beautiful girl ever walked this earth than my Estelle. She was in her mother's style, but much handsomer.

"She had rich masses of soft, glossy black hair, that she could shake in long natural ringlets far

below her waist. Her large dark eyes shone from beneath their long silken lashes, like stars in a midsummer night. Her skin was of a creamy whiteness, not dark or swarthy, and her little even teeth gleamed like pearls between the coral of her curved lips.

"She had the graceful undulating figure, the peculiarly elastic step, and the tiny arched foot and ancle for which Spanish women are so famous.

"But she was naturally vain, fond of admiration, proud and selfish, loving herself beyond everything in the world. Poor child! I know it now that it is too late; but I could see no fault at all in her at that time, and I idolised and spoilt my precious treasure, and by my weak and foolish indulgence of her childish whims and caprices, paved the way, only too surely, for all the misery and wretchedness that followed.

"When she was quite a little child, I dressed her in the finest clothes that I could buy, and her beauty, even when an infant, made strangers in the street stop to notice her, and many little gifts

of flowers, sweetmeats, fruit, and even money, the kind folks used to give her.

"The proprietor of the circus, Signor Cavalazzi, took great interest in Estelle; indeed she was the most attractive member of his company. He induced me to let her begin riding at an early age; it was her own wish, for she liked anything that made her admired and sought after; and a very graceful and clever rider she became.

"Several of the women told me, from time to time, that my indulgence of Estelle was unwise, and would bring me grief; that by fostering her love of ease, idleness, and finery, I was only making a rod for my own back; but I thought they were jealous of my beautiful girl, and that they spoke from envy, so I heeded them not.

"When Estelle was just seventeen, we went down for the summer season to a fashionable sea-side town, which was then crowded with elegant ladies and aristocratic young men. It was the gayest place we had ever been in, and Estelle's delight was unbounded.

"She would be out on the pier or the esplanade

whenever she could possibly get away, watching the beautifully-dressed ladies, as they passed in their grand carriages, or whilst they were promenading on the pier; and she would glance enviously into the jewellers' shops, and look longingly at the costly toys so temptingly displayed. And the more I humoured her, the more discontented she became until I could plainly see that she was growing dissatisfied with her home, and ashamed of me, her own father.

"She was much too proud to be a favourite with any of our women; but she suddenly made a great show of friendship for the daughter of the wardrobe-keeper, who was very clever with her needle, and, therefore, useful in helping Estelle in trimming and arranging her dresses.

"And now she began to object to my always walking with her, preferring the company of her new friend, Patty; and, although I was hurt at being thus unceremoniously put on one side, I was weak enough to give way to her even in this.

"Dress, gadding about, looking at the fine folks, hearing the band play on the pier, and her

part in the evening's performance, were the only things that occupied her mind.

"She read sometimes, but only silly, improbable love-stories, full of absurdities; she would take no interest in anything else.

"She never by any chance occupied herself in attending to domestic duties; she would not mend her own clothes, much less mine, or attempt any cooking, for fear of spoiling the delicacy of her pretty hands.

"There was a young man with us about this time, called Laroche, a very clever, industrious, and rather gentlemanly young fellow, who became very much attached to Estelle, and who, I am sure, would have made her a good husband. She encouraged him just at first, and I fancied she was even inclined to like him; but when we came to this fatal watering-place, she laughed at him—nay, she was quite indignant that he should presume to think himself at all her equal.

"I ventured to reason with her, for I felt hurt at her treatment of poor Laroche; but she turned angrily upon me, saying she didn't intend to marry

any man who couldn't keep her. When she did marry, she would have a husband who could give her plenty of money, and fine clothes, and jewellery, and a carriage to ride in, and not one that she should have to work and slave for. Ugly women could do that. It was all they were fit for; with her beauty she should certainly be able to do much better. I told her then, Miss Nina, that it was not proper or wise for people to marry out of their station, that such marriages were rarely, if ever, happy, and that men in time tire of the most lovely face, unless accompanied by other qualities as well.

"But she only laughed, and said there was plenty of time to think of that.

"She was young to marry certainly, but I should have been glad to see her settle down with some steady young man for all that.

"One day I went with her for a morning walk on the pier. Patty was busy, assisting her mother in the wardrobe, and could not be spared. It was a lovely day, and the assemblage was unusually large and fashionable.

"Estelle particularly remarked a lady who was driving in a showy open carriage, dressed in the extreme of fashion, and wearing a heavy gold necklet with several lockets blazing with jewels. Her face was painted evidently, although it was broad daylight. Everyone seemed to remark her. As she passed several gentlemen raised their hats, which she acknowledged with a gracious smile; and when she stopped her carriage to walk along the pier, a crowd of young men, fashionable idlers, gathered round her, whilst the ladies watched her eagerly, and talked of her costume, though several turned their heads away as she approached or looked disdainfully and contemptuously at her.

"Estelle drew me after her.

"'Father!' said she, 'isn't she lovely? Think what all that jewellery must have cost! And then her dress, and her lace, real, every bit of it, Patty says. Look at her Indian shawl, embroidered in real gold! And what a pretty carriage and pair of ponies. Oh dear, how happy she must be!'

"The poor child couldn't take her eyes off the woman. She seemed to possess the fatal

fascination of a rattlesnake, and unhappily the poisonous taint that hung about her was not less deadly, though I knew it not.

"'Do you know who she is?' continued Estelle, eager to tell me all she knew about her. 'She is called Lily Woodford now, she is an actress at a London theatre, but she was once waitress at an oyster-shop in Drury Lane, and they say she can hardly read and can scarcely write her own name. Yet Lord Lanesford has taken a beautiful house for her here on the Parade, and has given her all that lovely jewellery and her carriage and ponies. They say she spends what money she pleases, and next season he is going to take a theatre for her. And—father, just look at her! She is not half as pretty as I am, now is she?'

"I was horrified to hear Estelle speak like that, and I hardly knew what reply to make. Lord Lanesford was well known to be a very wealthy nobleman, extremely silly, for riches and brains do not always go together; he was, moreover, one of the fastest and most dissipated

young men of the period. He had a wife too, a charming high-bred lady, and several beautiful children.

"'Hush, Estelle,' I said. 'You do not know what you are saying; no respectable girl or woman would ever envy that unhappy creature's finery, bought all too dearly at the price of her good name.'

"'She doesn't look unhappy at any rate,' persisted Estelle, 'and with my appearance, I ought to do every bit as well. I should like a carriage and ponies, and servants in sky-blue liveries, and jewellery like hers, and to see everybody turn to look at me as they all turn to look at her.'

"'For God's sake say no more, Estelle!' I cried quite horror-struck. 'I would rather see you dead at my feet this minute, than like Lily Woodford.'

"And then I reminded her of a sad story that had happened not long before, in a town we had been visiting, of a poor girl who was led away by deceitful promises, and who, when

shame and disgrace all too quickly followed, cast off by her parents, scorned and shunned by her former friends, gradually sunk from bad to worse, dying at last a wretched and miserable death.

"Estelle had been loud in condemnation of this poor girl.

"I saw the angry blush mount to her cheek, whilst she bit her lip with her small white teeth till she almost drew blood.

"'Father!' she said with a bitter scornful look, 'I am not quite a fool; I am able to take care of myself. I know my value, and I certainly do not intend to throw myself away upon a mere circus-rider to please you or anyone else!'

"Then we returned home, and I felt sad at heart; for I was just beginning to reap the ill effects of my mistaken indulgence, and to see that what the women had so often told me about it was indeed the truth.

"No other word upon the subject passed between us, but I tried to prevent Patty from going out so frequently with Estelle. It was all of no

avail. Estelle was quite my master, and would have her own way.

"One evening Miss Woodford, accompanied by Lord Lanesford and several other fashionable young men, came to pay a visit to the circus.

"Estelle rode a Spanish act that night; it was in this performance, of all others, that she most excelled. I was clown to her act, and could well notice the effect her appearance produced.

"As she bounded lightly into the ring I saw, greatly to my surprise, that she wore a new and very costly dress, entirely different to the usual style of circus tinsel tawdriness. Yet she had not asked me for any money, she had not even mentioned the subject to me. How then could she have come by it?

"It was of rich rose satin, with white creamy lace arranged over it in soft draperies. A mantilla of the same fell over her glorious hair. A small bunch of richly-tinted roses peeped from underneath, another group fastened her bodice, and a third and larger one nestled among the lace draperies of her skirt. The roses were real flowers,

beautiful of their kind, such as could not have been bought by her in the market. I also noticed that round her neck she wore a collar of pearls with a diamond clasp, and that large single diamonds glittered in her ears.

"Beautiful as she always was, I had never before seen her look so surpassingly lovely; and my heart sank within me as I tried to think what it all meant. How I went through my business that night I cannot tell. I saw the admiration she excited. I saw with dismay the sensation her appearance caused amongst Lily Woodford's party. Lord Lanesford and Miss Woodford came round after her act, under pretence of seeing the horses, and Lord Lanesford spoke in complimentary terms to Estelle, and Miss Woodford said she would call for her and take her for a drive. No one took any notice at all of me, or even seemed to know that I was her father. I observed that one young man in particular seemed rather familiar in his manner, and once called her 'Estelle,' and that she blushed and seemed not quite at her ease,

but I had little time to notice more, for I was wanted to assist in the ring.

"That night I spoke to her very seriously. She confessed her beautiful dress, her necklace, ear-rings, and flowers were all presents from the young man whose familiar manner had so displeased me. She had met him on the pier; he was one of Lily Woodford's friends.

"Very angry and indignant she was with me for insisting upon her at once returning the young man's gifts. Many bitter, cruel things she said, but I was determined; neither would I permit her to go out with Patty any more. I kept her with me, and I never allowed her to walk out again without being with her.

"She grew sullen and peevish; she pretended she was ill, she would not ride, she gave way to passionate fits of crying; she said I was unfeeling and unkind, and wanted her to be a slave. I who had thought nothing too good for her!

"At last I resolved to take her away from this unlucky place. I got leave to join another

circus for a short time, promising to return to Cavalazzi's in the next town.

"When I told Estelle what I had done, she stormed and raved like a maniac; but finding I was firm, she suddenly grew quieter, and seemed resigned, busying herself even with arrangements for our departure, which was to be in a few days' time. Every night now Estelle appeared, for I was afraid of leaving her by herself. I dared not trust her.

"One night, when dressed for her act, she was suddenly seized with faintness, and could not ride. She had been restless and ailing all day, her cheeks burned like fire, her eyes were bright with a feverish light, she seemed painfully agitated and excited. I was alarmed, and sent her home in haste, for I feared she was sickening for some severe illness.

"Upon my return I found she had not gone to bed, as I had wished. She seemed strangely hysterical and nervous. When at last she bade me good-night, she kissed me tenderly, begging me to forgive her anything she had done at any

time to vex me, asking me always to try to think well and kindly of her, and never to fancy she would ever do anything to disgrace me. And I thought the poor child was regretting her waywardness, and the little unpleasantness Lily Woodford's party had caused between us. And that night I slept with an easier, lighter heart than I had done for many and many a night before.

"Next morning I prepared the breakfast as usual. Estelle was always late; but the time went on, and as she did not make her appearance, I thought I would take her breakfast upstairs to her room. She was not there!

"The bed was all untouched; it had not been used. Several little articles she had worn the night before were lying about the room, and on the dressing-table was a letter addressed to me.

"Stunned, with a feeling on me like one in a hideous dream, I tore open the envelope. It contained a few short lines from her, my beloved, but now utterly lost Estelle.

"'DEAR FATHER,

"'Your harsh conduct has driven me to this step. I have at last agreed to a secret marriage with Lord Lanesford's friend. He is enormously rich, he adores me, he will make a great lady of me, and by-and-by, when I return, you will have cause to be prouder than ever of your beautiful daughter,

"'ESTELLE.'

"My harshness had driven her to it! Oh, how bitterly did that line strike at my heart!

"I felt indeed guilty; I knew I was to blame for it; but it was my foolish over-indulgence, my sinful fondness and wicked idolatry that had been the cause of it all.

"Hardly knowing what I did, I made inquiries, and learned that before daybreak she had gone off with her betrayer in Lord Lanesford's yacht, the *Actea*, which his lordship had kindly and considerately lent for that purpose, bound, it was thought, for Malta.

"I dare not dwell upon this recollection; but,

Miss Nina, my poor child was cruelly deceived, the heartless wretch never intended to marry her. My poor Estelle's inordinate vanity and love of display made her an easy prey; even the letter she left for me showed her character—self, self, all throughout. No word of love on her part; all selfish thirst for admiration, finery, and wealth.

"A serious fit of illness succeeded this miserable time. It brought on an attack of brain-fever, and for some time it was feared I should be for life a raving maniac.

"Laroche nursed and tended me through it all; to him under Heaven's mercy it is I owe my life. He still remained with me, and when I grew strong enough to bear the exertion I resumed my business.

"Estelle's name was never mentioned; yet how her memory constantly recurred to me when I was clowning to some other lady's act, and I seemed to see her, as she had appeared that fatal evening, in her rich dress and creamy lace, with the hateful diamonds flashing in her ears.

"Since her disappearance I had heard nothing

of her; to me she was dead indeed. It was in August that she fled from her home, and August came round again, and still no tidings of Estelle.

"Christmas at length drew near, and Laroche and I were both engaged for London. I was a favourite then, and pictures of me were about on the walls in all directions.

"A bitterly, wretched, miserable Christmas too for me. I wished Laroche to spend it with some friends, but he would not hear of leaving me alone.

"Christmas-eve came, and we had two performances on that day. It was a dismal night, wet, with a cold bleak wind, and a stinging sleet making me feel more than usually depressed.

"I am not nervous or fanciful as a rule, but twice that night while going to the circus I thought I saw a ghastly face, with glassy eyes, gleaming at me from some shady corner of the street; no form of features could I trace, but yet I felt, with an awful sickly horror creeping over me, that there was some unearthly dead thing gazing stonily at me. I hurried on, not

daring to turn my eyes either to the right or left; and I was truly glad to think that after the performance I should have Laroche to walk home with me.

"But even then I found myself haunted by this same ghostly vision—once indeed I saw it so distinctly that I called Laroche's attention to it; but it had vanished and did not reappear.

"Twice again that night while sitting at supper I heard a sighing, moaning noise; but Laroche, trying to cheer me, said it was but the wailing of the wind.

"My nerves were overwrought. The dreadful face I fancied I had seen gazing at me still kept its place in my mind, filling me with apprehension and alarm; my terror grew upon me, until it became magnified into a vague presentiment of some mysterious but awful calamity.

"The church bells at length began to toll midnight in their deep brazen throats; the sound fell like a solemn death-dirge on my depressed spirits, not as the joyful herald of another bright and glorious Christmas morn. And then once more

I heard that awful, sighing, mournful wail, and this time no longer able to control the mysterious impulse that grew upon me, I rose, and opening the parlour-door passed through the hall to go into the street.

"As I undid the bolts of the outer door and slowly opened it, I heard distinctly a strange sobbing, moaning sound.

"Murmuring a prayer, for I felt fearfully terrified and alarmed, I looked cautiously round, and as I did so, to my unspeakable horror I saw the white ghastly face that had pursued me all the night, rise slowly from the ground before my feet. The awful thing turned, looked at me, and advanced a step, and in a voice so hollow that it seemed distant many miles away, muttered in faltering accents: 'Father, I have come home to die.' Then it tottered forward, falling senseless in my arms; and I knew that I held close pressed against my heart all that remained to me of my wilful, beautiful, betrayed Estelle.

"Poor child! poor child! she spoke too truly. She had indeed come home to die. But not alone,

for with her perished also a tiny life of but a few short minutes' span. A blighted blossom, nipped in the bud, in mercy spared a life of pain, unhappiness, perhaps of sin like its poor mother's. A floweret gathered by a loving Father's hand, transplanted to the glorious realms of everlasting spring, to blossom brightly amidst the fairest flowers of the eternal Paradise.

"Before she died she told me how the base wretch had deceived her. It seems he soon grew tired of her, and her proud spirit resented his deceit and treachery. When at last she found her shame too great a burden for her to bear, she begged and implored him to marry her for her child's sake, but he brutally jeered at and insulted her, saying he was tired long since of her silly pretty face; that fretting had already spoilt her good looks, and she must indeed be a fool to think that men in his position ever married girls like her.

"Heartbroken, crushed in spirit, outraged in every sense, the poor child fled from her cruel betrayer, and made her sad way back as best she

could to the one friend she thought she still had left, her poor old father. Her money spent, she sold first one article of clothing and then another.

"At last she saw my name in a London paper, and came to the circus, hiding about to see me, longing to throw herself at my feet, yet fearful of my repulsing her too. And then, in her pain and trouble, feeling that she was dying, she came that sad Christmas night to beg for my forgiveness, and to die in my arms.

"If her sin was great, so was her punishment. Heaven has surely pardoned her repentant and humbled spirit.

"That is my sad story, Miss Nina, and now you will understand why the sight of those diamond ear-rings made me feel sick at heart."

## CHAPTER III.

### WEAVING THE WEB.

Crosby St. Clair was sitting one afternoon in his private room at "The Royal," absorbed in reflections of not altogether the most agreeable character.

For events, just now, bid fair to tangle in no slight degree the meshes of the web this crafty human spider was patiently toiling to spin round those who had crossed his path, and who had been unfortunate enough to incur either his love or his hate.

At first his thoughts involuntarily turned in the direction of the pretty circus-rider Nina, and a darker shade gathered on his lowering brow as he called to remembrance the circumstances under which he had seen her last.

Playing the spy was a part congenial to his mean and disingenuous nature; thus Crosby St. Clair had watched Nina and Caryll with feelings of concentrated hatred and malice during nearly the whole period of their conversation in the field.

Too distant to overhear what she said, the girl's innocent confusion and vivid blushes were yet more eloquent than words, and with electric speed the thought flashed across his mind that in this detested Captain Gordon he might possibly encounter a formidable, if not successful rival.

Crosby St. Clair never paused to consider that, had it not been for Captain Gordon's most unlooked-for interference in the wood the day upon which he first encountered Nina, he would have dismissed her altogether from his mind, and not have wasted another thought upon her.

His vulgar intrusion and coarse behaviour in the glen meant nothing at the time beyond a passing fancy to amuse himself at her expense, and to enjoy her evident embarrassment and discomfiture.

But the moment this hated Captain Gordon appeared upon the scene, all was altered in Crosby's

eyes; and even while uttering his venomous hints and insinuations to Percy Marchmont, he was conscious of a curiosity to know more of the young girl, and this paltry dog-in-the-manger-like feeling was intensified a thousand times upon his subsequently seeing Nina with Captain Gordon in the lane leading from Clairvale, when he was driving in the carriage that so nearly ran over her.

But what was good enough for Captain Gordon was good enough for him, and forthwith the pretty Nina was singled out by Crosby St. Clair as the future object of his amorous designs.

All attempts, however, to improve her acquaintance had signally failed. He had flattered Mr. Brayson's crowning weakness by sending him a thoroughbred horse to train; he had been no less assiduous in his attentions to Madame Giuseppina and Miss Lisetta, but all to no purpose.

He had actually accepted Mr. Brayson's repeated invitations to visit them *en famille,* but even then Nina was nowhere to be seen; his only opportunity of gazing upon her was during the time of her

performance, and these continual disappointments had given a keener zest to his appetite, increasing tenfold his fancy, admiration, and desire.

For Crosby St. Clair was now as much in love with Nina as it was possible for one of his selfish and sensual nature to be with anything or anybody except himself.

While still indulging in this train of thought, Captain Gordon was suddenly announced.

So abrupt and unexpected was this interruption, that Crosby was unable to appear as self-possessed as usual; but his visitor, apparently unconscious of his discomfiture, after the ordinary civilities, proceeded at once to the business of his errand.

"Mr. St. Clair," commenced Caryll, going straight to the point, "I am leaving this place in a few days' time, and intend making a tour in Italy. But the financial state of my affairs is by no means satisfactory. My losses on the turf have been more serious than I anticipated, and I find myself compelled to raise a considerable sum. We have had trifling transactions of this kind before, therefore I prefer applying to you; that is, if you

can arrange it. It is a large amount that I require —that I must have—five thousand pounds at the very least, and that immediately—say by the end of the week."

This speech, uttered by Caryll Gordon in a tone of haughty condescension, irritated and perplexed Crosby St. Clair.

Something was up, evidently, or why this sudden departure and this foreign tour?

Had Nina anything to do with it? His jealous instincts were at once on the alert.

Then the man's egregious vanity and vulgar cynicism came to his aid. Perhaps, after all, this imperious, self-sufficient young aristocrat had failed to make any impression upon the little circus-girl.

Her acceptance of his gifts was of no moment in Crosby's line of argument.

People of her class invariably took all they could get; that was his experience in matters of this kind. It was not youth, or personal advantages, but length of purse that carried the day.

Crosby St. Clair's palpable hesitation jarred

unpleasantly on Caryll's impetuous, overbearing spirit.

"I presume you are acquainted with the peculiar restrictions and conditions of the late Mr. Ainsleigh's will; the way, in short, that the money is tied up until the completion of my twenty-sixth year. The security is good; there is no risk. Do you feel inclined to entertain the proposal, Mr. St. Clair, or shall I apply elsewhere?"

Crosby St. Clair's thin lips stretched into a furtive smile, and his pale blue eyes, emitted a transient gleam of malice, as he marked and interpreted in his own way Caryll Gordon's evident impatience and annoyance.

Nevertheless, it was no part of his tactics to anger him just now.

"We need not enter into particulars about that, Captain Gordon," Crosby hastened to explain. "Any business transactions with you would be eminently satisfactory, of that I am quite certain. The fact is—I may state it to you in confidence—I have been accommodating Mr. Marchmont lately to a very large amount, and I am, therefore, a little at

a loss, and doubtful if Simmons—if my London agent—will be prepared to find such a lump of money at such very short notice."

"In that case it is useless discussing the matter further," said Caryll, rising.

"Stay a moment, Captain Gordon, I beg," interposed Crosby, who thought he saw a chance of netting a big fish, and had no mind to let it slip through his fingers; "suppose I could get you two or three thousand pounds by the end of the week, you might perhaps wait a little longer, say a month, for the remainder—eh?"

"It would not be of the slightest use. I must have the whole amount immediately."

"In that case I will telegraph my London agent at once."

But Crosby's real intention was not to telegraph either to London or elsewhere; he knew well enough where to find more than the money required at almost a minute's notice, he merely wished to gain time, to gain an opportunity of sounding his visitor as to his motives in thus precipitately deciding upon his Continental tour. In

short, he wished to glean information that at some future time he might be enabled to turn to account.

"Sir Hugh Pierrepoint intends wintering in Italy, I hear," resumed Crosby after he had gone through his pretence of filling up the telegraph-form, and had duly given it into the hands of the head waiter for transmission. "The youngest Miss Pierrepoint is in delicate health. They are going to Florence."

"Indeed!" remarked Caryll laconically.

"Mr. Marchmont was my informant. I believe he intends accompanying them," added Crosby, anxious to show how accurately he was acquainted with the movements of people of quality like Sir Hugh Pierrepoint and his family.

"Really! A very sudden determination on his part."

"By no means. He mentioned the matter some days ago when promising to gain Sir Hugh's patronage for Brayson's benefit. By-the-bye, Captain Gordon, I was not aware you knew the Braysons," hazarded Crosby with a sidelong glance at Caryll's face.

"Knew? What name?" inquired the latter, a slight flush passing over his cheek.

"Brayson. Circus people and all that sort of thing. Got a capital show at the other end of the town. Brayson's a very decent little fellow himself—genial, good-tempered, awfully amusing. Not a gentleman, perhaps, but then you don't expect to find that in a circus-man. By George, his wife's a thorough woman of business, and good-looking even yet. By-the-way, she's the aunt of that little girl you were talking to the other day."

Caryll frowned impatiently, and Crosby, actively on the alert, perceiving his annoyance, quietly pursued the same topic.

"Nice little thing. Well behaved, too, for her class, and clever. But you'll surely patronise Brayson the night of his benefit?"

"When is it to be?"

"Next Monday. Percy Marchmont promised to bring Sir Hugh and his daughters, and I told Brayson I'd do my best for him too. He thinks so much of real swells like you and Mr. Marchmont. May I tell him you will come?"

"Tell him what you please."

"Thanks. You're sure to be amused. He'll have a first-rate entertainment, and that little Nina looks awfully nice on horseback. She'll make a devilish pretty woman. Hardly grand style, perhaps, but she'd be a sensation if she were properly brought out. By George, I've a great mind to take her in hand myself. It wouldn't be such a bad idea after all. We've had burlesque goddesses, can-can dancers, opera-bouffes, and nymphs with skipping-ropes, but nobody seems to have thought of making a circus-girl the fashion."

"Mr. St. Clair," exclaimed Caryll, at length fairly losing his temper, "I have not that intimate acquaintance with Mr. Brayson or his family that you profess. But I will not suffer you to speak of Mdlle. Nina or any other young lady in my presence in the offensive and highly disrespectful manner you have just used."

"My dear sir, I was but joking," remarked Crosby apologetically, but with an ill-concealed sneer. "Really, you take one up so sharply that it

would almost seem as if you were interested in that quarter yourself."

Captain Gordon's only answer to this impertinence was by peremptorily putting an end to the interview. He could not restrain the disgust he experienced in the society of such a vulgar "cad" as this Crosby St. Clair.

And yet were Caryll's own thoughts so pure and spotless? Dare he cast the first stone? Does not his conscience at various times give him sundry sharp pricks and stabs?



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## CHAPTER IV.

### AN UNWELCOME VISITOR.

Next morning Crosby St. Clair set out to pay his usual visit to Mr. Brayson at the circus, ostensibly to witness that gentleman's method of breaking horses. On the way there, however, happening to meet Madame Brayson and her daughters driving through the town, he rightly conjectured that Nina would be at the house alone, and thitherward, without loss of time, he accordingly proceeded.

The loud clanging of the outer bell quickly summoned the little maid Janet, followed by Dido frisking and barking at her heels; but Nina, standing at the side entrance, felt her heart sink within her as she saw the unknown visitor at

the circus, and her only too well remembered persecutor of the glen, coming up the garden walk towards the house.

"If you please, Miss Nina," began Janet, after duly ushering the visitor into Madame Brayson's only sitting-room, "if you please, it's the gentleman as master says is always to come in. He wants to see missus badly, and he'll wait till she comes back, or he'd like to see you, miss, if you can make it convenient."

Nina does not think it convenient by any means; but deciding that in this way she may be able to get rid of him, she summons up her courage and proceeds forthwith to the dining-room.

A pretty unconventional picture meets Crosby's eye as she timidly enters the room.

Not radiant with rose-leaf bloom, pearl powder, and gaudy jewellery, attired in an affectedly extreme toilette, or with artificially tinged eyelashes, like the *divas* at whose shrine he has been in the habit of worshipping. Nina, standing before him, in her plain dark dress unrelieved save by the

white collar and cuffs and little apron that she wears, looks a complete type of all that is innocent and charming.

"I am sorry Madame Brayson is not at home," she says courteously, though feeling by no means at her ease in such close proximity to her odious persecutor of the glen. "I am afraid she will not return until dinner-time; but I have no doubt that you will find Mr. Brayson at the circus. If you have any message, I will not fail to deliver it."

"Thank you, my dear, but I think I'll wait till your aunt returns," replies Crosby flippantly, staring rudely at her the meanwhile. "I'm not at all pressed for time, and you and I can improve our acquaintance. I've had no opportunity of seeing you since that day you were playing Sleeping Beauty, you know, and then I must say you behaved yourself like a very naughty little girl indeed."

Crosby has fully resolved to make the most of this opportunity at all events.

Therefore he coolly contemplates Nina at his

leisure, much the same as he would remark the good points of a horse he intended buying, or the specialities of a prize ox, or a fat pig at a cattle-show.

"It is not usual for anyone to wait here during Madame Brayson's absence," remonstrates Nina, not a little vexed at the man's manner; "and I must ask you to excuse my remaining, as my time is fully occupied until madame's return."

"Ah!" ejaculates Crosby with an odious leer, "you have more leisure in the afternoons, my dear, I dare say."

Nina turns scarlet.

"I must leave you," she says hurriedly; "madame would be angry if I neglected my duties whilst she was away."

"Don't go, my dear," says Crosby, rising and seizing the handle of the door, just as she is going to take hold of it, "I want to have a nice little chat with you; I want you and I to be friends, you know. You're an awfully nice little thing, and I should like to do you a good turn. There now," he adds coaxingly, "you needn't be afraid

of me, my dear; I'm a friend of the Braysons, and I never tell tales out of school, that is when little girls behave prettily and are good; though I must say the little glimpse I caught sight of the other day looked uncommonly like a bit of love-making on the sly."

As Crosby St. Clair finishes his speech, he quietly places his back against the door with a light mocking laugh, thereby effectually preventing Nina from leaving the room.

"Come, now, sit down by me, and let's make friends, there's a good child," he goes on, trying to induce her to take a seat by his side. "And only to think this downcast, blushing, demure young puss should be such a sly little fox after all, making quiet appointments with gentlemen. Oh, fie!"

"You have no right to prevent my leaving the room," cries Nina passionately; "stand out of my way, sir, and let me pass."

"Hoity toity! Don't lose your temper, little one," laughs Crosby, watching every change in her face with the cruel pleasure of a cat torturing a

poor little bird that has fallen under its merciless paws. "I suppose we haven't said anything to auntie yet. But you ought to be careful, my dear child, how you listen to the fine speeches and grand professions of these young swells—these notoriously gay deceivers; even when they do make us such very tempting presents."

"Let me go, please," implores Nina piteously.

"And now, my dear," continues he, still keeping the handle of the door in his hand, "you really must let me give you a piece of advice, quite as a friend. I happen to know a great deal about that gentleman. You are not the first lady by any means to whom he has made sweet speeches—ay, and pretty presents too; and he knows well enough that it is much easier to make fine promises than to keep them."

"How dare you speak to me like this, sir?" exclaims Nina, getting angry and indignant. "Your conduct is most ungentlemanly. Stand aside and let me pass!"

"Would it be ungentlemanly, do you think, to tell Madame Brayson of a certain little meeting and

a certain little present?" persists Crosby with a malicious sneer.

"Oh, sir, you would not surely do that!" cries Nina, thoroughly terrified, and feeling completely at this man's mercy. "It was no appointment, indeed it was not. I never for a moment expected to see—to meet anyone."

Here her voice sinks to a whisper, and large tears force themselves into her eyes.

"Well, well, my dear, don't cry. Be a wise little girl and listen to reason. I wish you well and only warn you for your good. That young gentleman is trying to make a fool of you, amusing himself at your expense. I am acting the part of a true friend in putting you on your guard before any mischief is done. But if I am discreet and tell no tales, I expect to be paid for it of course." And he advances towards her with an ugly leer. "One kiss, just to seal the bargain between us."

The girl, however, starts back with an exclamation of horror and disgust, and a rapid glance sufficing to prove that egress by the door would be impossible, she rushes madly towards the window.

Crosby, resolved not to be beaten, darts forward, catching her in his arms, determined at all events to steal a kiss. But, more dexterous than he imagined, and with the additional strength of extreme terror, Nina succeeds, after a brief struggle, in twisting herself eel-like from his grasp, and striking him a blow with her little fist full on his face, she flies swiftly from the room, leaving the baffled Crosby St. Clair smarting with rage, mortification, and defeat.

## CHAPTER V.

### LITTLE BOBBLES TURNS DRESSMAKER.

As the time for Mr. Brayson's benefit draws near there are signs of great commotion and excitement throughout the establishment, for it is confidently expected that it will be an unusually brilliant affair.

Mr. Brayson himself is in the best of spirits; but there is far more on the little man's mind than even his benefit just now.

He has freely spoken, in his confidential moods, of the unmistakable attentions of the great nobleman, travelling *incognito*, who is madly in love with Lisetta, but who is so bashful that only at present through the medium of his friend Mr. Marchmont has he ventured to hint

at anything, beyond indeed the very significant facts of his bouquets and presents; but who Mr. Brayson firmly believes intends formally proposing for his daughter's hand on the occasion of his benefit.

Meanwhile, the sempstresses and women in the wardrobe department are having a weary time, embroidering the beautiful new dress Lisetta is to wear, and working new trappings for her horse.

Little Bobbles has always been considered an authority in the wardrobe. His taste is undeniable, and his skill in designing and cutting out remarkable; he can embroider in gold and silver, and do spangling as well as any professed embroideress. He is usually asked, as a favour, to design and superintend the working of the new pad-cloths and trappings when any are required, but upon this particular occasion Little Bobbles seems by no means amiable.

At all events in this instance he flatly refuses any assistance whatever, and the poor wardrobe-keeper is quite in despair.

Evidently Little Bobbles, so meek, civil, and

good-natured at other times, is in a very ill-humour about something or other. Mrs. Price, the wardrobe-keeper, says he actually made use of a very naughty word beginning with "d" when she mentioned Miss Lisetta's name, besides telling her to "go to the devil!" an excited flow of language in which the poor little man had never previously been known to indulge.

Whatever it might be that was preying upon Little Bobbles' conscience, he at length conceived the brilliant idea of unburdening his mind to Peter, apparently with a beneficial result; for he suddenly regained his wonted cheerfulness and amiability, and Mrs. Price and he became even greater friends than before; nay, there seemed to be quite a mysterious understanding between them, and Little Bobbles designed, cut out, and superintended the handsome new trappings for Lisetta's horse Apollo, and very effective indeed they were.

Nina still came to pay her daily visit to Peter, and even she could not fail to notice a strangeness and pre-occupation on the part of Little Bobbles,

of whom, however, during the last few days she had scarcely seen anything.

Neither had she seen Caryll Gordon since the afternoon when he had given her the ear-rings; he had gone to London to make arrangements for his Continental tour, having had no previous opportunity of communicating with her.

So that on the Sunday before Mr. Brayson's benefit, she had journeyed alone to Clairvale to bid adieu to her kind friends Mr. Woolrych and his daughter Bessie, and had been greatly disappointed at seeing nothing of Caryll; indeed she could scarcely keep from tears, which the good clergyman and Bessie both remarking, tacitly accepted as a proof of Nina's affectionate regret at parting with them.

Mr. Brayson came home to dinner the day of his benefit, flushed with triumph and whisky, and more than slightly elevated.

"Only fancy, Peppina my love," said he, addressing his wife after a grotesque embrace and a sounding kiss, "the Mayor, Mrs. Mayor, and all the Mayor's family are coming to-night, Mr.

St. Clair, his wife and daughters—those grand ladies you know, who live up at Sea-gull's Nest—and I think all the fashionable people for miles and miles round. Mr. St. Clair is that jolly old fellow who would insist upon my taking supper with him at 'The Royal;' and, Peppina darling, if it hadn't been for him, I should never have made Mr. Percy Marchmont's acquaintance, and secured a nobleman for my son-in-law. Peppina, I really think we ought to return the compliment, and invite Mr. St. Clair here to-night."

"My! wouldn't it be fun—just!" exclaimed Master Jimmy, in her rude, hoydenish way. "Let's make him awfully drunk, and send him home to his 'Nest' on a police-barrow, the same as he did you, pa. It would be a game!"

"Hold your tongue, miss," returned Mr. Brayson sharply, scarcely flattered by her remark. "Peppina," he went on, addressing his wife, "I've ordered a dozen of champagne, for of course we shall have to drink the future baroness, or countess, or duchess's health," here he nodded approvingly at Lisetta. "I know champagne's the proper thing

for swells, and I want to give old Podmarsh a bit of a turn as well. Jolly old chap. And then his champagne is only thirty shillings the dozen, and if I'd ordered it from "The Royal" they'd have charged seventy or even more. We've plenty of bitter ale and whisky in the house, and I suppose that's all they'll want; but I say, Peppina, do see that there is plenty to eat."

After dinner Mr. Brayson and his wife are in the habit of indulging in a quiet nap, and to-day Lisetta is advised by her anxious father to do the same, in order that she may look more captivating for the evening's performance.

By-and-by a ringing is heard at the outer gate, and the little maid, Janet, goes to answer it, returning with a note for Nina.

"And it was a young gentleman as give it to me, and he was oh, so handsome!" says Janet admiringly; "and here's this for myself," adds the girl, opening her hand, and showing Nina half-a-sovereign; "and he was driving such a beautiful trap and horse, with a servant and all behind."

Her first love-letter! Such a beautiful one,

too, she thinks, although it is very short, containing indeed only a few lines. However, it explains Caryll's enforced absence of the past few days, and tells her how she is to contrive to see him the following day, and that he intends being at the circus that evening.

Such is in reality the substance of the letter, but how rich in tender eloquence and love it seems to Nina, and how proud and happy she feels in its possession as she reads it over and over again, kissing it repeatedly, and placing it, when at length she can tear her greedy eyes away, close against her heart.

Jemima, the *enfant terrible* of the family, soon comes to divert her attention.

"Haven't you two finished by this time?" she commences, prying round to see what she can devour. "I say, is there anything nice to be given away? You might tell us what's going to be for supper."

At this moment another ring is heard at the bell of the garden-gate, and Janet, Jemima, and Dido all rush pell-mell to see who it is.

Back comes Master Jimmy breathless with excitement.

"It's the champagne pa ordered of old Podmarsh," she cries. "I say, Nina, did you ever taste champagne? They say it's such awfully jolly stuff, and pa's ordered a whole dozen! Why, they'll never drink all that! It's more than one apiece, you know, all round. I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll just open one on the quiet, and have a little taste all to ourselves. Pa'll never be a bit the wiser. He'll be too tipsy to count the bottles to-night," she goes on irreverently, "and if he did we could say it got broke by accident."

"No, Jemima; you mustn't touch it. It's strong wine; it would get into your head and make you ill."

"My head is not so weak as you think, Nina," returned the perverse girl. "I often have some of pa's whisky when I'm out driving with him, and it never hurts me."

"Jemima, put it down, there's a dear," said Nina, trying to coax her.

"I intend 'putting it down,' as Little Bobbles says when he's doing his 'high stilts,'" retorted Master Jimmy with a loud laugh, forthwith taking her departure from the kitchen, bottle in hand.

Presently a popping noise was heard, and back came Jemima with the bottle uncorked in one hand, and a half-emptied tumbler in the other.

"I say, didn't it go off? Just like ginger-pop," she said giggling, as she placed the bottle on the table. "I hope they're all asleep upstairs. Oh, it's so good, Nina, you have a drop, too. Don't the men know what's good, that's all. I do wish I was a man, that I do!"

Whereupon Master Jimmy finished her tumbler, and Nina, taking the bottle from the table, quietly placed it in the cupboard of the room, taking the key and putting it in her own pocket.

Nina's duties require her presence at the circus that evening a little earlier than usual; but upon going to her dressing-room she sees no sign of her poor washed tarlatan dress that she knows will look

so shabby in contrast with Lisetta's beautiful new one, and Caryll is going to be there!

He will see Lisetta look so nice, and she in an old tarlatan thing with dingy faded flowers. Oh, it is too bad!

But she has little time for vain regrets, it being later than she thought.

Presently Mrs. Price, the wardrobe-keeper, comes to assist her, bringing in with her Nina's dress-basket.

The young girl tosses it open impatiently enough, starting back, however, with an exclamation of delighted surprise, for she sees, laid carefully inside, a glittering, fairy-like, beautiful new dress, so gauzy, light, and ethereal, that she is positively afraid to touch it.

Mrs. Price, however, has no such compunction; she shakes the skirts out lightly, and arranges the bodice and trimmings with business-like promptness.

"Come, Miss Nina dear, you're late as it is. Let me finish you. Take off those old shoes; here are some new ones for you," and she holds

up a pair of pink satin slippers that would have done justice to Cinderella.

"How very beautiful!" cries Nina. "Has madame sent me this charming present—this lovely dress?"

"Madame, indeed!" returns Mrs. Price, with a contemptuous sniff and a toss of her head, as she puts the finishing touches to the young girl's costume. "Oh yes; you're safe to get a lot out of her—about as much as Paddy shot at. Why, she's that mean, she won't let me have tapes or buttons for the wardrobe; and the ballet costumes and quadrilles are disgraceful! she even grumbles at the washing. The last pins I had to pay for out of my own pocket; and I'm determined I'll buy no more. They may go on patched up anyhow, and 'bust' themselves in front of the audience for what I care. Perhaps that'll shame her!"

Mrs. Price feels particularly savage with Madame Giuseppina to-night, on account of the trouble she has given her about Lisetta.

"How is it I have this pretty dress if madame

did not order it?" asks Nina, wonderingly. "Who bought it? Who made it? Who sent it to me?"

"I made it, Miss Nina, leastways I stitched the bodice. But there, my dear, you'd be badly off indeed if you hadn't kinder friends in the world than madame, without going so very far either to look for them," adds Mrs. Price mysteriously.

"But I daren't go in the ring like this! I shall have to wear my old dress after all," cries Nina, greatly perplexed.

"Ah, but you just can't," exclaims Mrs. Price triumphantly, "for I've been and tore all that old rubbish up to ribbings; besides, the ponies are almost through, you've got no time to change. And oh! Miss Nina dear, you do look beautiful!"

Nina turns to her little cracked mirror, about a foot square, the only glass she has to dress by, to arrange a group of silver lily-bells and maidenhair fern in her hair. But she knows well enough she looks lovely, and how pleased she is! Caryll will never have seen her so beautiful before. She no longer fears Lisetta. And then she thinks of the

diamond ear-rings, hidden away in her little purse, which for safety now she carries in her bosom.

She entirely forgets Peter's story and the sad warning it conveyed, or if it does still linger in her mind, she fondly imagines her Caryll is so different, he would not be guilty of such base treachery and deceit. She feels she could not love him as she does if he were not all that is good and true and noble. Recollect she is only a weak, trusting, utterly inexperienced little fool! Just a woman! In years scarcely even that, nothing wiser, nothing greater than the rest.

So the brightly flashing diamonds tremble like magic dewdrops in her ears; and as she trips lightly and gracefully into the arena, a murmur of admiration and astonishment at the lovely picture she presents melts into an enthusiastic burst of applause.

As Caryll's jealous eyes rest on her, the vaunted superiority of high-bred fashionable beauties, with their pre-Raphaelite angularities and quaint imitations, copied from pictures by old masters; ay, even the superlative attractions of that faultless

goddess of beauty, the Hon. Edelgitha herself, all fade and die out of his mind, and he confesses that he has never seen a vision of loveliness and unstudied simple grace so perfect and complete as that presented by his own darling little Nina.

Her glorious hair, falling in careless natural waves of deepest gold over her low wide brow, is gathered at the back into a rich knot low on her neck, displaying to perfection the shape of her graceful little head. Her twinkling feet and ankles, her rounded arms and tiny hands are models worthy a sculptor's chisel.

As she bends gracefully to the boxes, her eyes rest just one instant upon Caryll, and a blush like a rosy cloud at dawn suffuses her face. Then she is lifted on her horse, and her attention is all engrossed by the requirements of her performance.

But there has been yet another surprise in store for her. In turning towards the handsome black and white horse the groom is holding in readiness for her to mount, she sees, instead of the usual tarnished trappings, beautiful new ones of bright emerald-green velvet, white and silver,

while on the pad-cloth is embroidered her own name "Nina."

And the poor girl fancies all this must be Caryll's gift, and tries, if possible, to love him better for it, whilst Little Bobbles, peeping at her through the curtains at the ring doors, lets the tears run down his cheeks with joy and pride as he exultantly experiences the proud consciousness that it is he who has made her look so surpassingly lovely this evening, and he wonders what she will say to him when she discovers to whom she is indebted for this truly charming surprise.

When at last she is permitted to leave the ring — for she is recalled several times — Nina hastens to her room, and hastily taking her ear-rings from her ears, replaces them in their hiding-place within her purse.

As it happens, not a minute too soon—for the door of the room is violently thrown open, and Madame Giuseppina enters noisily and abruptly.

It needs no gift of penetration to see that she is in a fearful rage. Her black brows scowl; her lips are tightly pinched together; her head is bent

forward from her shoulders, as you may see a venomous snake stoop its head before springing at its victim.

She flings the door angrily to, and advancing to Nina, demands in her coarse angry voice:

"What is the meaning of this dress?"

Nina, blushing and trembling before her indignant gaze, looking as beautiful as the banished Peri, knows not what answer to make; in her secret heart she feels Lisetta, in all her magnificence, will have but a small chance after her; she can therefore well understand madame's fury and uncontrollable indignation.

Little Bobbles, ever watchful and considerate where his idolised Miss Nina is concerned, quickly sends Mrs. Price to the rescue; and with a great deal of perhaps unnecessary impertinence in her manner (for she has received that evening, quite unexpectedly, the offer of an engagement elsewhere, and consequently feels herself supremely independent), Mrs. Price proceeds to inform Madame Giuseppina that Miss Nina's new dress, "means that the poor young lady was always dressed

shameful, a real disgrace to such grand folks as the Braysons to let their own flesh and blood be seen like that; and so at last the company had taken it up, leastways Mr. Bobbles had, for he it was who had made the dress, and new pad-cloth, and all; and it was his humble present to Miss Nina, who never knowed nothing about it until this very minute."

"And see, here's Mr. Bobbles's own letter at the bottom of the basket, which Miss Nina hasn't so much as even looked at," continued Mrs. Price, "and we took and hid her old dress, for fear she wouldn't wear this one."

Madame Giuseppina tears Little Bobbles's letter out of Mrs. Price's insulting hand, failing, however, to make anything at all of it, it being in point of fact, nothing less than a second copy of the wonderful verses destroyed by the vindictive Mrs. Widgett, rewritten upon pink gilt-edged paper as before, with the dedication intact, not even forgetting his signature, "Joseph Bobbles, commonly called 'Little Bobbles.' Age 27," at the back.

But more than half Nina's pleasure and enjoy-

ment is gone, now that she knows it is only Little Bobbles, and, not as she thought, her noble Caryll, to whom she is indebted for her charming costume and undoubted success that evening.

## CHAPTER VI.

### MR. BRAYSON'S BENEFIT.

An unusually brilliant and fashionable audience was present at the circus on the occasion of Mr. Brayson's benefit.

All the great people he had mentioned were there in due form. The mayor with a large party, including Mrs. St. Clair and her daughter, Sir Hugh Pierrepoint, the Misses Pierrepoint, Percy Marchmont, Crosby St. Clair, and Captain Gordon.

In addition to the distinguished and fashionable audience, there was also another visitor whom Mr. Brayson was very proud to see, no less a person, indeed, than the great London Leviathan Circus man, Mr. Mangles.

Mr. Brayson had felt it an honour, when his

son, Mr. Gussy Mangles, had paid him a visit, but now here really was the great man himself.

The motive of Mr. Mangles's present visit to Mr. Brayson's establishment was just this: Some time ago, he wrote to Little Bobbles (as we know) offering him an engagement, but to this letter Little Bobbles had vouchsafed no reply; the loss of his poetry, Peter's accident, and Mrs. Widgett's alarming conduct, having sent all recollections of it completely out of his weak little head; whereupon Mr. Mangles, chancing in the course of his travels to be at no very considerable distance from Tayside, thought it might be as well to run over and see for himself how things were going on, and whether there was anything in Mr. Brayson's establishment that he could possibly turn to his own advantage.

The winter was drawing rapidly on, and Mr. Mangles was in want of novelties for his Christmas season in London.

In Nina and Little Bobbles he soon discovered what in his hands he could transform into "stars" of the first magnitude.

Little Bobbles he decided he must have. The

clown's quaint drollery and ludicrous gravity were inimitable, and his skill in the usual well-worn tumbling and pantomime tricks surprisingly good.

He also thought that he should like to get Nina. The rest, in his private opinion, were mere ordinary artistes, including even the grandly-"starred" Miss Lisetta and her self-important papa.

But this was not the opinion, by any means, that he was good enough to air for the benefit of Mr. Brayson and his wife. To them he marvelled at Lisetta's beauty, grace, and *aplomb*. He considered the attraction of Mr. Brayson's magnificent horses, that gentleman's wonderful performance of them, together with Miss Lisetta's extraordinary balloon-act, sufficient to draw the town, no matter where they went.

Mdlle. Nina, as an artiste, was, in his opinion, quite superfluous — extinguished completely by the side of Lisetta, which eulogium on his own and his daughter's merits elevated Mr. Brayson to the seventh heaven of delight, so that he could not refrain from confidentially informing the great

Leviathan that he is afraid he sha'n't be able to keep his darling Lisetta long; that a nobleman is over head and ears in love with her; and that he is going to propose for her hand that very night.

Then he pointed out the supposed nobleman to Mr. Mangles, who, thinking Mr. Brayson must be either mad or drunk, or perhaps a little of both, contrived to get away from him as quickly as possible.

Meanwhile Nina had gone quietly home, having had no opportunity of seeing Little Bobbles to thank him for his well-meant and generous gift.

She finds Jemima capering about the house in the highest possible spirits, and excessively good-tempered—which last is a novelty; and Nina, seeing her so full of fun, wonders what it all means.

The truth is, that while, according to Master Jimmy, Mrs. Price was letting ma have it pretty hot, that young lady quietly abstracted the key of the cupboard from Nina's dress-pocket, and has been amusing herself by drinking the remainder

of the champagne, which accounts for her unusual liveliness.

"Did you drink it all, Jemima?" inquires Nina aghast, when at length she discovers the truth.

"I gave a little drop to Janet, to prevent her splitting on me to pa, you know," replies Master Jimmy, with a knowing wink. "I should have opened another bottle, only I was afraid of being found out; but I intend going in for it at supper."

Soon Madame Giuseppina and Lisetta arrived, escorted by Percy Marchmont and Crosby St. Clair.

Mr. Brayson has been endeavouring to persuade the Leviathan to favour him with his company to supper; and, failing in that, he tries to secure old Mr. St. Clair, whose presence throughout the entire evening has been completely ignored by Mrs. St. Clair and her daughters, Mr. St. Clair not being permitted to join their grand party with the mayor. Neither is he permitted to join Mr. Brayson's party, for his wife peremptorily insists upon his returning with them in the carriage to Sea-gull's Nest.

Being thus doubly disappointed, Mr. Brayson

is glad to fall back upon Mr. Podmarsh, who, having escorted his "old woman" safely home, is nothing loth to enjoy a good feed at Mr. Brayson's expense.

## CHAPTER VII.

### A CRUEL DISAPPOINTMENT.

Crosby St. Clair eagerly accepted Mr. Brayson's pressing invitation; he was anxious to avail himself of every opportunity of improving his acquaintance with the circus proprietor's pretty niece, for rebuffs and disappointments gave a further zest to his appetite; while Percy Marchmont scented fun and mischief when "Neddy Bray" gets "half seas over," which, upon this momentous occasion, Percy thinks he will be sure to do.

Upon Mr. St. Clair's appearance Jemima at once pounces upon him and insists upon showing him her private collection of curiosities, consisting of a choice assortment of whips, a seal that belonged to old Ducrow, the tooth of a mammoth

horse, and a stuffed kitten with two heads that her father once exhibited alive, for Mr. Brayson is partial to monstrosities, or "natural curiosities," as he is pleased to call them.

These Master Jimmy keeps in the kitchen department of the house; and when they return to the dining-room, they find Mr. Brayson and Mr. Podmarsh both comfortably seated at the table enjoying a preliminary glass before supper.

Madame Giuseppina promptly seats Crosby in the post of honour at her right hand, and Percy Marchmont, on the other side of Lisetta, sits facing Mr. Podmarsh and next to Mr. Brayson.

Master Jimmy, thinking there is most fun and champagne to be got out of pa and that "rummy old chap," takes her place by Mr. Podmarsh, while Crosby, casting his eyes round the table, suddenly discovers there is no seat at all provided for Nina.

Nevertheless he inquires for her, and being promptly seconded by Percy Marchmont, Madame Giuseppina feels it expedient to send for her, and the only vacant place being at madame's left hand,

Nina finds herself exactly opposite Crosby St. Clair.

Master Jimmy is just beginning to enjoy herself immensely, giving her opinion upon everything very freely to Nina, and finishing by filling herself a large glass of champagne from the bottle Mr. Brayson has just opened.

Nina ventures a gentle remonstrance.

"Lor bless her! It won't hurt her," says Mr. Brayson; "it isn't often we celebrate an event like the present."

"I say," exclaims Master Jimmy confidentially to Mr. Podmarsh, giving him a violent nudge with her elbow, "do you know our Liz is going to be a real lady—to marry a live lord? That's why we've got company to supper to-night, and why pa bought a dozen of your champagne, to drink their healths. He's going to tell us all about it by-and-by, in a speech, when he's warmed himself up a bit."

Nina hears this in perfect agony; she sees Jemima's glass of champagne disappearing and trembles for the consequences.

Mr. Brayson gradually gets a little impatient; he is already slightly confused in his ideas; indeed, he doesn't know whether he ought not to begin and set things going by proposing his own health, but he waits a little while longer, hoping his intended son-in-law will come to the point of his own accord.

But Crosby continues gazing at Nina with undisguised admiration, and seems quite incapable of doing anything else.

Madame Giuseppina can make nothing at all of him.

Percy goes on doing the amiable to Miss Lisetta, while Jemima drinks some more champagne.

Mr. Brayson's patience having at last arrived at its utmost limit, he rises, and after a preliminary appeal to his glass he "Ahems!" a few times and proceeds to make a speech.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he begins; "that is to say, kind friends and the public generally——"

"Hear, hear!" from Percy Marchmont.

"At least, that is, I mean not the public generally."

"Hear, hear!" again from Percy.

"I should say, kind friends," stammers Mr. Brayson, "for I hope we are all friends here!"

"Hear, hear!" says Percy very attentively.

"Allow me to thank you one and all a thousand times for the great honour you have done me in coming here this evening upon this truly auspicious occasion.

"It is my proud privilege and pleasure, ladies and gentlemen," proceeds Mr. Brayson, "and the public generally—I mean kind friends——"

"And Christian brethren!" says Jemima *sotto voce*.

"To announce a very high honour that I, that is—that one of my family—in fact, that all my family have received. By which I intend to allude to my eldest daughter here, my darling Lisetta!"

"Hear, hear!" from Percy.

"It is not every happy father," Mr. Brayson goes on to observe, "whose proud privilege it is to be able to announce that he will have the honour of calling a lord his son-in-law!"

"Hear, hear!" cries Percy, stifling with laughter.

"Ladies and gentlemen and the public generally —I mean kind friends, allow me to propose the health of the noble lord, my future son-in-law!"

"Oh lor!" says Master Jimmy irreverently, at the conclusion of her father's speech. "Is that all pa's got to say!"

"Mr. Brayson," exclaims Podmarsh, shaking hands with his host, "I congratulate you, and the young lady too."

Mr. Brayson immediately thanks Mr. Podmarsh a thousand times in return.

"All right," puts in Jemima with an eye to business, "let's drink his jolly good health," and she holds up her glass.

The glasses are filled all round and the toast is drunk, Crosby joining with the rest. Then the proceedings come rather dismally to a full stop.

Mr. Brayson feels a little awkward. "Peppina, my love," says he to his wife, "I call upon our friend on your right to reply."

Thus adjured, Crosby most unwillingly gets up. He doesn't in the least know what to say; he is completely in the dark as to the mysterious lord

Mr. Brayson is continually talking about; and he knows he is not at all a good hand at making a speech.

Jemima laughs, and pulls Podmarsh by the sleeve.

"Don't he look a fool?" she asks, but Podmarsh prefers eating and drinking to listening to "speechifying" about a matter in which he takes no interest.

"Mr. and Madame Brayson, Miss Lisetta, Mr. Marchmont, and the company generally," commences Crosby nervously and in a very low mumbling voice, for he fears he shall look ridiculous in Nina's eyes.

"Well, I'm sure," comments Jemima, "it wouldn't have hurt him to have mentioned us," and she puts one arm familiarly through Podmarsh's and the other through Nina's.

"I have heard with great pleasure all that our kind host, Mr. Brayson, has just told us, and I perfectly agree with him that he is unusually fortunate in being able to secure so distinguished and exalted a personage for a son-in-law."

"Hear, hear!" from Percy.

"Ditto, ditto!" from Master Jimmy, rapping her glass on the table.

"I beg to congratulate Mr. and Madame Brayson both very sincerely, as also the charming and accomplished Miss Lisetta herself, though such good fortune is only what her amiability and talent would justly entitle her to receive."

"Hear, hear!" very loud indeed from Mr. Brayson himself, by this time getting slightly muddled.

"Well, I never!" cries Jimmy to her special favourite, Mr. Podmarsh, "he does know how to praise himself and no mistake!"

"And now I am confident you will all gladly join me in drinking the future health, happiness, and prosperity of the young lady herself, the charming and accomplished Miss Lisetta."

And Crosby sits down again, very much relieved to think he has got through it at last.

Mr. Brayson has just sufficient sense to be aware that things are somehow or other not pro-

gressing quite so favourably as could be desired, whilst the shadow of an ominous frown hovers over Madame Giuseppina's brow.

Of course Lisetta's health has to be drunk, and by this time, thanks to the champagne, Master Jimmy is so completely upon good terms with herself and everybody else, that it is as much as Nina can do to prevent her from making a speech too, and returning thanks for Lisetta. Mr. Podmarsh having eaten as much as he possibly can, now throws himself back in his chair, fully prepared to give every attention to the general conversation.

Then Mr. Brayson thinks it only polite to speak a few words respecting his friend Podmarsh.

He is not very coherent, but is understood to say that he thanks his friend a thousand times for being in some slight way the means at "The Royal Hotel" of his making the acquaintance of the illustrious personage he shall have the honour of claiming as his son-in-law, and who, he thinks, as they are a mere family party, there can

be no impropriety in now introducing to their notice.

Here Lisetta, thinking of what is to follow, turns very red, and begins to fidget with her pocket-handkerchief.

Madame Giuseppina seems restless also and glances at Crosby, who, in his turn, appears to be endeavouring to look all ways at once.

Master Jimmy is now so delighted that she can hardly sit still.

"That's him!" she says excitedly, pulling Mr. Podmarsh forcibly from his chair, then running round to Crosby, she taps him playfully on the back, saying to him in a very loud whisper:

"I shouldn't bother to make another speech if I were you, you'd be sure to make a mess of it; I should just catch hold of Lizzie and give her a hearty kiss, and we'll drink your jolly good healths, and wish you both joy, and all that sort of thing!"

This whispered but fully audible speech of Master Jimmy's causes universal consternation.

Lisetta is overwhelmed with modest confusion.

Madame Giuseppina looks indignant. Percy Marchmont thinks matters seem to be going a little too far.

Mr. Podmarsh gets up excitedly to have a good look at the "real live lord" sitting opposite, but quickly sits down again with an expression of blank disappointment, as he says, turning to Mr. Brayson:

"That there gent ain't no more a lord than you or I, sir. His father's my old friend and master, Mr. St. Clair, of Sea-gull's Nest; he used to be a cheesemonger, and a nice tidy bit of money he's got put away in his old shoe too. He's been an artful old card in his time, he has. He's took care of his pence and the shillings, till the pounds took care of themselves."

This awful revelation of Mr. Crosby St. Clair's real identity falls like an avalanche upon the assembled group.

Mr. Brayson, speechless with disappointment and horror, hastily fills himself a tumbler of champagne, which he drinks off at a draught.

Crosby St. Clair, disgusted and deeply mortified,

has some dim consciousness breaking in upon him that they have been taking him for the mysterious lord all this while.

Percy is very wroth with vulgar, intermeddling little Podmarsh; but at this juncture Madame Giuseppina, rising in a stately manner, and directing a withering glance at the unfortunate Crosby, which if it could have fulfilled that lady's intention would have had the effect of pulverising him on the spot, takes Lisetta, drooping and overwhelmed with shame and confusion, in her fond maternal embrace, and sails majestically from the room followed by Nina and Master Jimmy, the latter somewhat abashed at the unexpected consequences of her interference.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### A FAMILY SCENE.

THE following morning, Madame Giuseppina, her husband, and two daughters, are sitting in solemn conclave.

Madame Giuseppina is busy with some cloth which she is dotting all over with large-sized spangles, a process supposed to have a soothing and composing effect upon her nerves; but her black brows scowl, her lips are pinched tightly together, her whole manner brooding no good to those unlucky enough to fall under the weight of her displeasure.

Lisetta sits pouting over some trivial and completely useless bit of fancy work.

Jemima, more subdued and tractable than

usual, seats herself on a footstool beside her mother with little Dido on her lap.

Mr. Brayson, looking very melancholy, very yellow, and most unmistakably seedy, takes up his position on the sofa opposite his wife.

He would like to steal quietly away, for he fears that a storm is gathering, but he is too giddy to stir, and far too shaky and unsteady on his legs to pay his usual morning visit to the circus.

Madame Giuseppina does not keep them long in suspense.

"It is a state of things that must be put a stop to at once," she commences, jerking viciously at her spangling. "I have been treated with open defiance and contempt, all through the artful hypocrisy of that treacherous little hussy, Nina! Who is to be master in your circus, I should like to know? Is any member of your company that chooses to be allowed to set himself up and dictate to you? Answer me that question, Mr. Brayson, if you please!"

Mr. Brayson shuffles uneasily on the sofa.

"Peppina, my darling," he says in a faint tone of voice, and turning a shade yellower, "I don't feel very well; I think I'd better have a little drop of whisky to settle my nerves. Jemima, love, ask your ma for the key and get it out."

"Jemima will do nothing of the kind. It is the abominable whisky we have to thank for this dear child's disappointment," says Madame Giuseppina sternly, pricking over at Lisetta with a spangle on the point of her needle.

Mr. Brayson, considerably disconcerted, imploringly whines out:

"For mercy's sake, Peppina! You don't know how bad I feel, without your flying at me like that. You know you thought he was a lord yourself. It's quite bad enough to have a proud and happy father's feelings hurt as mine have been, without the wife of his bosom pitching into him as well; and, besides," he adds, parenthetically, "I do feel so ill."

"Silence!" roars Madame Giuseppina, bringing her fist down smartly upon the table, with a noise that frightens the rest of Mr. Brayson's words

completely out of his head. "Listen to me, Mr. Brayson," continues she, giving her husband a glance of undisguised scorn and contempt. "You were tipsy the very first thing last night; yes—yes, you know well enough it was so. If you had been sober, and looking after your business, that underhanded girl, Nina, would never have been able to carry out her infamous plot. Little viper!" adds Madame Giuseppina, between her set teeth.

"Peppina, I think you're rather hard on the girl," ventures Mr. Brayson timidly.

"The whole company sets you at defiance," proceeds his wife. "The men get drunk whenever they please, and if I discharge them, you take them on again; and now Little Bobbles, who hasn't the spirit of a mouse, and is contented with almost any salary we like to give him, even he grows insolent at last, and takes upon himself to insult us by making new trappings and finery for that half-bred little hypocrite, Nina!"

Here Madame Giuseppina, in giving point to her words having pricked too viciously at her green

baize tray of spangles, upsets them all upon the floor, which causes her to drop for a few moments the thread of her discourse.

"Handsome trappings too, and no mistake," puts in Mr Brayson, evincing some interest in the subject, "and 'pon my word, Peppina, the girl looked splendid. We ought to begin to star her up, and make a feature of her."

Madame's face as she raises it from her pursuit of fallen spangles is a perfect study.

"Have you quite taken leave of your senses, Mr. Brayson?" she demands with the cold petrifying stare of a modern Medusa.

"I'll never ride again in your circus, pa!" exclaims Lisetta angrily, "if that forward little minx ever appears in anything after this, except the *entrées*. If she's so very wonderful all of a sudden, I'm sure you're quite welcome to 'star her up' and make a feature of her, as you call it; but you'll have to do without me, so you can just choose between us," and hereupon Lisetta takes herself off out of the room, slamming the door violently after her.

"Brute! See how you have hurt poor Lisetta's feelings," exclaims Madame Giuseppina, returning with fresh vigour to the attack. "But I'll stand it no longer; this mischief-making impertinent girl that you appear so fond of, that you wish to make of more importance than your own daughter, shall be got rid of at once!"

"Wait till after Christmas, Peppina."

"I tell you she shall go at once. I will not be insulted through her, and Little Bobbles shall be fined heavily for his insolent interference."

"I don't think Bobbles deserves a fine," ventures Mr. Brayson; "he thought he was doing something kind and good-natured, I'm sure. The things must have cost him a good bit of money, they're A 1 and no mistake; but if you don't like Nina to accept them, handsome as they are, we'll just give them back to him."

"What!" exclaims Madame Giuseppina, aghast at the bare idea of such a thing. "Give back all those beautiful things! I am not quite such a fool, if you are, Mr. Brayson. I shall put them in the wardrobe, of course."

"If we offend Little Bobbles, and he leaves us in the lurch in our new town at Christmas, we shall be in a pretty fix."

"I have not very much mismanaged your affairs hitherto, I believe, Mr. Brayson," sneers his wife. "It is only your horrible love of low public-houses that has prevented you from being the very first circus-proprietor of the day."

"Neddy Bray can hold his own with any of them, no matter who," says Mr. Brayson conceitedly. "They're afraid of me. I'm the man for the public! Why, only the other night they made a song about me down at 'The Cock and Bottle,' and a thundering good song it was too, only I forget what it was about except the chorus."

And Mr. Brayson commences singing in an uncertain quavering voice the following refrain:

If he goes in
He's sure to win—
Neddy Bray! Neddy Bray!

"Tommy Dodd! Tommy Dodd!" chimes in

Master Jimmy with animation, for she is thoroughly well up in all the vocal gems of the gutter.

"Jemima, do put down that horrid little beast, and tell Nina I want her," says her mother irritably.

Whereupon Jemima tumbles little Dido unceremoniously head over heels on to the floor, much to that small animal's astonishment, and still whistling the chorus, "Tommy Dodd! Tommy Dodd!" goes off to fulfil her mother's errand.

"I say," she begins the moment she catches sight of Nina, "ma's been kicking up a pretty 'shindy' in the parlour, and now she wants you; and, oh my, won't you catch it! I wouldn't be in your shoes for something."

Nina's face grows a little pale, and a grave, serious expression settles on it; but she is no coward. Besides, she feels she has a new protector in her beloved Caryll, whose precious letter lies against her heart.

She enters the sitting-room calm but resolute,

fully prepared to face her tigress aunt, Madame Giuseppina.

Mr. Brayson is walking up and down the room in a restless and fidgety manner; he thinks he would like to get out of doors. It would, at any rate, be better than listening to his wife's scolding tongue; and as she won't let him have any whisky at home, he'll just go down to his favourite house-of-call, "The Cock and Bottle," and get some there.

But, unfortunately, as his fingers make the round of his pockets one after the other, "no effects" in each instance being the disappointing result, he cannot quite see how his object is to be accomplished.

Madame Giuseppina looks up from her spangling as Nina enters the room. It is a look of direst hatred, of cruel, crafty, venomous revenge, her eyes gleaming with the cold glistening brightness of a snake.

But Nina, standing patiently before her, interprets rightly the cold glitter of hate in Madame Giuseppina's eyes, and having waited some time,

thinking the latter would speak first, quietly proceeds to take the initiative.

"You sent for me, madame?" she says in a perfectly respectful tone.

"I did, mademoiselle!" returns Madame Giuseppina with ironical politeness, "and since you have been good enough to comply with my request you will perhaps also favour me with an explanation of your extraordinary and inexcusable behaviour last evening."

"I have none to offer, madame," says Nina gently. "Mrs. Price fully explained everything herself. I was as much surprised as anyone, and thought at first you had provided the dress."

"You thought I had provided it!" repeats Madame Giuseppina with an acrid smile of derision. "Is it like me to do that?"

Nina confesses to herself that it is not.

"You may say what you please, mademoiselle," Madame Brayson continues in the same cold sneering voice, "but you do not in the least impose upon me. You have been for some time past in the habit of complaining to Mrs. Price and the

company generally, but you shall do so no more. Last night you wilfully insulted me before my own people, and now I wash my hands of you. From to-day you appear no more in public at my establishment. As soon as I can make suitable arrangements you shall leave my house; till then do not presume to enter this room again or to associate in any way with either my daughters or myself."

"Have you anything further to say, madame?" inquires Nina in the most provoking manner.

"Anything further to say, you base deceitful girl!" she exclaims in a voice trembling with passion. "Yes, indeed; I have something further to say. Do you remember what you were when I first took pity on you? What you might have been to this day but for my goodness and generosity? Have I not given you the shelter of a home, brought you up amongst my own family, fed and clothed you out of pure charity? What have you ever been to me but an expense, trouble, and hindrance, since the first moment I saw you?"

Nina, as yet, listens in silence and attempts no

reply; but a slight colour plays upon her cheek, her little red lips are firmly set, her breath comes and goes faster than usual, and her eyes darken and dilate, as they steadily meet the woman's cunning glance.

Madame Giuseppina presently renews her attack.

"But for me, mademoiselle, you might have been sent to the workhouse, or turned into the streets to starve. When your ridiculous, fine lady mother, with her extravagant silly notions——"

"Stop, madame!" says Nina, speaking at last, advancing a few steps towards Madame Giuseppina, and looking her fearlessly in the face. "My dear mother's memory is sacred. Say what you please about me, I will hear it patiently; but my mother's name shall not be mentioned by anyone in my presence either slightingly or with disrespect."

The Italian bursts into a short laugh of gratified malice. At last she has been successful in making Nina flinch.

"Very good, mademoiselle," she says in her most cruelly insulting manner. "You even pre-

sume then to dictate my words to me! You are kind enough to tell me how to speak! Well, then, listen! I tell you deliberately that my brother, your father, committed an act of the most insane folly when he took for his wife the disgraced cast-off, starving English governess who was your mother!"

Nina's eyes darken ominously, flashing fiery gleams of true and honest indignation, as defiantly she flings Madame Giuseppina's words back in her teeth.

"What you have just said, madame, is utterly untrue, and you know it to be so. No breath of disgrace could sully my dear mother's name, for she was purity itself! Governess she may have been, and poor, but she was still a well-born English lady and a true gentlewoman. There is no higher, no nobler title in the whole world."

"Hear her! Listen to her! How grand, how dignified she is!" retorts Madame Giuseppina in mocking accents; then, continuing in tones of concentrated rage and malice, she hisses, rather than speaks: "And you, you vile, underhanded,

sly little hussy! You dare to tell me I speak untruths, to call me to my face a liar! You! a wretched girl, without a penny in the world; a miserable outcast, dependent upon charity; a destitute orphan brat——"

"I am no outcast, madame," interrupts Nina with dignity; "neither have I ever been dependent upon your charity. Orphan, unhappily I am; but I was not left penniless. When my mother died——" The poor girl's voice falters here, and she gives a slight hysterical sob, but mastering her emotion with a proud effort, as if she disdained to show that Madame Giuseppina's brutal words had power to affect her, she proceeds: "When my dear mother was induced to trust herself in your hands she had several valuable horses belonging to my father, and some few hundred pounds in money, besides her jewellery, all of which came into your possession when she died. I was only a child, but I can well remember a great deal that then took place. Her money enabled you to make your first successful venture with a circus of your own. The horses my father trained made Mr.

Brayson's reputation as a horse-breaker. You have been paid over and over again for anything you may have expended on me; and from the very first you have made me work almost as if I were your slave. Yet, madame, knowing all this, have I ever complained? Have I ever been wanting in respect, or neglectful of my duties?"

Nina pauses for a reply. Two bright spots of hectic colour burn on her cheek. She still tries to keep calm, but the ordeal is almost too severe.

Madame Giuseppina's face turns all shades and colours during this last speech of Nina's; she can hardly credit the evidence of her own ears; indeed, so completely is she taken by surprise, that she remains open-mouthed, yet silent, for words refuse to come to her aid.

Mr. Brayson's vanity and conceit are also deeply wounded by this very unexpected plain-speaking. She has contrived to hit him in his most vulnerable part by daring to impugn his skill and ability as a trainer of horses.

"Let me tell you, Miss Nina, that you are going a little too far," he says, getting up with grotesque

pomposity, and strutting towards her with a ridiculous and self-important air. "How dare you insinuate that I don't understand my own business?"

"Oh, the brazen face! The impudent lying slut!" joins in Madame Giuseppina, who has by this time regained the use of her tongue. "Now you see what she really is, Mr. Brayson. Now, perhaps, you will believe me." And starting from her chair she comes violently forward as if to strike Nina in her rage, treading heavily as she does so upon little Dido, who has been lying at her side, and who runs with a cry of pain to Nina for protection.

The young girl takes her little favourite in her arms, then turning to Mr. Brayson with an unflinching look, she says, steadily facing his angry blustering manner:

"I have said no more than the truth, Mr. Brayson. You and madame both know it to be so. It was by means of the money and property left by my parents that you were enabled to attain your present position."

"And you dare say this to me?" screams Madame Giuseppina, fairly beside herself with rage, striding towards Nina and seizing her savagely by the arm.

Dido frightened, barks loudly, whereupon the vicious woman, pulling the little animal from Nina's arms, hurls it with all her force to the other end of the room, where it falls heavily, badly hurt, and uttering piteous cries of pain.

Nina waits to hear no more. Before Madame Giuseppina has time to resume her attack or to strike her—as indeed was her intention—the girl darts forward, and picking up the ill-treated, whining little Dido, flies to her own apartment, where sinking upon her knees by the bedside she bursts into a passion of tears.

As for Madame Giuseppina, she is in such a violent paroxysm of rage that Mr. Brayson feels quite alarmed.

He therefore loses no time in escaping to the garden, where he is fortunate enough to find Master Jimmy, and that young damsel happening to possess pocket-money to the amount of eighteen-

pence, her father borrows that trifling sum, and thus provided goes on his way rejoicing to his favourite "Cock and Bottle," where he speedily regains his wonted equanimity with the assistance of a few drops of whisky.

## CHAPTER IX.

### CROSBY'S LOVE AFFAIR.

In less than an hour after the termination of the stormy scene described in the last chapter, Nina, with little Dido in her arms, was walking rapidly along the deserted winding road leading from Tayside to Clairvale.

She expected to meet Caryll, but it was much too soon for that, still Nina felt she could not possibly remain in the house; and in her agitated, restless state of mind, she was anxious to get away as far as possible from even the remembrance of Madame Giuseppina's tyranny, for she could not breathe freely under the shelter of that cruel woman's roof.

But, alas! helpless girl that she was, what

could she do? Where was she to turn for aid and assistance in her extremity?

The only way to safety and freedom was with Caryll; yet what a strangely sudden step to contemplate.

Only a month since she had seen him first; knowing even now scarcely anything of his real character or history, and nothing whatever of his family or position, but implicitly and unsuspectingly believing in the sincerity and devotion of his love for her.

And now she turns from the road, into the field where they have talked before, and seating herself upon the trunk of the fallen tree she takes her treasured letter from its hiding-place, reading and re-reading it many times. Although she knows every line and word of it by heart, she is never tired of looking at the writing his fingers have traced, or of kissing the paper his dear hand has touched.

The afternoon wears on, but Nina is still too full of anxious thought to be aware of the swift flight of time.

But she feels cold; the sky is overcast, the sun has ceased to shine, it threatens rain. She gets up from her rustic seat, and goes towards the road. There is someone approaching. It is—it must be Caryll. Her heart bounds, she makes the utmost haste to reach the spot, that she may see distinctly who is coming that way.

So well she times her speed that she arrives at the gate just as the gentleman comes up, and she finds herself face to face, not with Captain Gordon, but with Crosby St. Clair.

It is too late to turn back, annoyed though she be, whilst the look of delighted surprise on Crosby's face is too genuine to be doubted.

It is evident he did not anticipate seeing her; nevertheless, he fully intends to improve the opportunity so unexpectedly afforded him.

"I am awfully glad to have met you," remarks Crosby after the first few words. "I have been wanting to explain to you all about that confounded mistake Mr. Brayson made about my paying attention to his daughter Lisetta. Whatever could have induced him to suppose such a thing, I cant'

imagine. Miss Lisetta's clever, and a first-rate jumper, but she is not my style in any way, I do assure you."

"Mr. St. Clair," says Nina coldly, "there is no necessity for any explanation. It does not in the least interest or concern me."

"Excuse me, but it does concern and interest you very much indeed," persists Crosby. "I've been wanting to speak to you very particularly about it; for, who knows? you may have thought I was getting 'spooney' on Miss Lisetta too."

"Indeed, Mr. St. Clair, I never thought anything at all about it. I repeat it could not possibly interest me."

"The fact is," continues Crosby a little hesitatingly, for he finds getting on with Nina rather uphill work, "ever since I first saw you ride, I've not been able to think of anything else. Oh, 'pon my soul, now, that's the truth," adds Crosby, in what he considers a persuasive manner, for Nina gives a slight sign of impatience; "last night's business completely finished me. I never in my life saw such a charming little fairy as

you looked, and I'm a good judge, too. You're quite lost here, you're not appreciated a bit. Brayson and his wife will never give you a chance while their own daughter's with them; and it's a deuce of a shame, by Jove it is. So I just made up my mind last night to speak to you, and I can tell you this plainly enough—the sooner you're away, out of your aunt's clutches, the better, for she means you no good."

Nina gives a little sigh. She feels Crosby is right about madame's tender mercies, and his speech sends her thoughts back to the painful scene that has so recently taken place between them.

Crosby takes this as a sign of encouragement, and, with increased confidence, accordingly proceeds: "I'm a bad hand at beating about the bush, but when I once make up my mind to undertake a thing, I thoroughly intend to carry it through. Now, you know, I've taken an immense fancy to you, and I'm sure you must be very unhappy and uncomfortable as you are, and so I've determined to take you by the hand myself. I can afford to do it in style, for I am rich, and can make you as fine

a lady as you'll see anywhere in London or Paris. Whatever fancy you may have shall be gratified, for I mean the correct thing, and you'll find I shan't go back from my word. Your establishment shall be equal to anything you can find anywhere, and I can't say fairer than that, can I? You shall have the prettiest carriage and ponies money can buy. Every one of your dresses shall come from Paris; and, if you still wish to ride in public, although I don't think I should care much about it, you shall even do that as well. Some ladies like to keep to their profession, I know. There's little Tottie Fallit, of 'The Athenæum,' now, wouldn't leave the stage for anything, although her establishment costs Lord Losinghame thousands a year, and her salary is only thirty shillings a week. I'll make you the fashion; no one shall be able to cut any figure at all beside you. You shall be the sensation of the London season. By Jove, you shall!"

At last Mr. Crosby St. Clair has unburdened his mind, and laid his magnificently liberal proposals at Nina's feet.

But she, absorbed in the train of thought his mention of Madame Giuseppina has evoked, lets him run on unheeded and unchecked, scarcely indeed listening to a word he says; and most assuredly not in the least comprehending the real point and meaning of his grand and tempting offer.

When at last Crosby comes to a full stop, and naturally feels anxious to know how his proposals are received, he is by no means agreeably surprised to find Nina too much occupied by her own thoughts to be even conscious that an answer is required.

"I fear you have scarcely understood my meaning, Nina," he says, feeling both awkward and angry. "Perhaps you don't think I mean it, but I'll be as good as my word, every bit; and you'll not get a better offer in a hurry, I know. Make up your mind to accept—now, there's a dear little girl. I'll be a good fellow to you, Nina, upon my soul I will. You little puss! you've quite bewitched me. I never cared twopence about any woman in my life before; but

now you've sent me head over ears in love with you, and there's nothing in the world I wouldn't do to make you happy!"

Nina gradually wakes from her reverie during the latter part of Mr. Crosby St. Clair's speech. When he has got as far as this she turns to him with a look of genuine distress.

"Mr. St. Clair," she says gently, "I am sure you mean kindly, and that you really wish to help me; but although I am very grateful, I cannot accept your offer. I am in too much trouble and misery to express all I wish to say, Mr. St. Clair," she adds, in a faltering voice; "but you will see how painful this subject is to me. Good-bye. I shall always gratefully remember your generous offer at a time when I stood sorely in need of friends."

Then she holds out her hand to Crosby in simple good faith. He scrutinises her sharply out of the corners of his eyes, wondering whether her innocence be real or assumed. Deciding in favour of the latter, he takes her hand, but not to say farewell. He holds it tight in his, and,

drawing her closer to his side, whilst a shade of disappointment and vexation gathers on his brow, he continues in a more unpleasantly familiar tone:

"Come, I say, Nina, my dear child! Don't be absurd. Let us understand one another. I offer you my protection, security from poverty, ill-usage, hard work; you shall have every happiness that money can procure, or my love bestow —for I do love you, Nina, you tantalising, demure little puss! By Jove I do!"

Nina, beginning to grow alarmed, tries to pull her hand away from Crosby's grasp. But he does not let her go.

"You must listen to me, Nina," he says impatiently. "I cannot part with you just yet. You'd never be so silly as seriously to refuse an offer like mine. What future is before you, child? Severe hard work for only a few short years at best, and that for a miserable pittance. Perhaps the chance of marriage with some low acrobat or tumbling fellow, who will make you work and slave for him, and very likely ill-treat you into

the bargain. And what a prospect for your old age! Oh, Nina, you cannot really mean that you would prefer a fate like that to the life of splendour and happiness you would lead with me?"

"Please to let me go, Mr. St. Clair. I have told you that it cannot be. Do not give me cause to think other than gratefully of you. Please to let me go."

For he still holds her so tight, she cannot free herself.

"Look here, Nina, it's all nonsense and humbug!" exclaims Crosby St. Clair, losing his temper. "No girl in your position would be fool enough to refuse such a chance, unless there was something else going on behind the curtain. By George!" he exclaims, while a sinister expression settles on his face, "if it's that Captain Gordon, you've been in the habit of meeting on the sly, that you're after, I can tell you you're quite in the wrong box there. He's a selfish, extravagant fellow, over head and ears in debt, and a mean-spirited cur as well. And, as for caring

for you, why, he may have been amusing himself with a little passing flirtation; but all the world knows well enough that he was madly in love with the celebrated London beauty, the Hon. Edelgitha Amyott. He wanted to marry her, but you'll find he won't want to marry you. And he can't place you in the position I can, either."

Nina's cheeks are crimson with rage and shame. She forgets fear, alarm, everything, in her anger and indignation against this man who speaks to her of Caryll in terms of such insolent, degrading familiarity.

"Let me go," she cries, trying to free herself. "How dare you try to detain me? What right have you to speak to me like this?"

"What right?" returns Crosby, almost beside himself with passionate fury. "The right love gives—mad, fierce, uncontrollable love like mine for you. A love that will leave no stone unturned to gain its object. Listen to me, Nina. All I have said to you about this man, this Captain Gordon, is true, every word of it, I swear it is.

The man himself could not deny it. He is utterly unworthy of you. He may seem to you more attractive than I. He may have a false, flattering, deceitful tongue, but he cannot love you one-tenth part so well, for in his heart he loves another woman; whilst I, Nina, dear Nina, till I saw you I never loved a woman in the whole course of my life. By Heaven, it is true!"

"Let me go, Mr. St. Clair," cries Nina, too angry to feel much fear of the vile creature who still keeps possession of her hand. "I refuse entirely to believe one single word of what you say. But were it all true, were he as unworthy as you intend to insinuate, it would not alter my determination. Leave me at once, sir, and never presume to speak to me again!"

With a quick, sharp movement she succeeds in wresting her hand from Mr. St. Clair, and turning, she faces him boldly, with the wild reckless courage of despair.

"You'd better not defy me, Nina," says Crosby with insolent familiarity, gazing at her with brutal admiration, for he thinks her more beautiful

than ever in her anger. "But there's no occasion to go off into mock heroics, or to make a scene; I'm not going to carry you off by force," he adds with an ugly sneer and a coarse laugh. "Only mark my words, my turn will come, by fair means or by foul; it is for yourself to choose. If you consent to my terms, every luxury, pleasure, and happiness money can buy shall be yours. I have never yet failed in the accomplishment of any object upon which I have really set my mind, and be well assured I will not fail in this. But remember," he adds with an abominable smile, "if you refuse my offer now, when at last my turn does come, you may not find me quite so liberally disposed!"

"Stand aside, sir, and let me pass!" exclaims Nina with the dignity and gesture of an empress. "I will not hear a word more. Do you hear, sir? Let me pass."

She makes an attempt to reach the gate leading to the field, but Crosby places himself rudely in her path.

Angry and indignant with him as she is, she

yet looks so lovely that he cannot find it in his heart to let her go.

"It is to be war between us, then, my pretty Nina, is it?" he inquires with an evil laugh, his pale face growing ghastly in the whiteness of his suppressed rage, his small blue eyes gleaming with a cold phosphorescent light as he still stands barring her way with his back coolly placed against the gate.

"I do not stoop to war with such as you," replies Nina with a glance of superb and withering disdain. "I despise and I defy you!"

Then she turns abruptly on her heel, determined, since he still continues to bar her way, to return to the town by the road.

Crosby darts after her, maddened with rage and stung to frenzy by her proud scorn and contempt, by the flashing fury of her magnificent eyes that had beamed with such inexpressibly mournful tenderness for his rival even whilst he had spoken to her of his treachery and unworthiness.

No longer master of his actions, but completely

overpowered by his insane thirst and craving for revenge, he does not stop to reason with himself.

Had he dagger or pistol with him now he would be sorely tempted to the commission of a rash and murderous deed. As it is, he seizes her roughly by the shoulder, putting his hand with brutal violence round her white and slender throat, as though he would choke or strangle her.

The girl, taken by surprise, looks round with a half-stifled smothered scream at this vile monster, whose livid distorted face she sees, to her alarm, so horribly near her own. One awful agonising moment of terror, which Nina fully anticipates will be her last, and Crosby St. Clair is flung headlong into the road, where he lies for a few moments senseless and stunned with the force of the herculean arm that has so unexpectedly overthrown him; whilst Nina, trembling like a fluttering bird set free from a cruel fowler's snare, to her inexpressible joy and relief finds herself at last folded in Caryll Gordon's fond and protecting embrace.

Then Crosby St. Clair, slowly recovering,

staggers to his feet, and looking after Nina and Caryll with the fiendish hate and demoniacal malice of a lost soul, in the impotence of his blind rage shakes his clenched fist at them.

"So the debt is to go on accumulating, Captain Gordon, is it?" mutters he. "Enjoy your short-lived triumph while you may. I know how to wait. And when at last my plans are fully ripe and the day of retaliation is at hand, the debt shall be repaid to the uttermost farthing, and you shall writhe and grovel in the very dust at my feet."

## CHAPTER X.

### TURNING THE TABLES.

Mr. Brayson's visit to "The Cock and Bottle," armed with Jemima's eighteenpence, wonderful to relate, did the little man a great deal of good.

He had not sufficient money with him to induce him to take an undue amount of whisky, while the quantity he did take had the salutary effect of steadying his nerves, and enabling him to pull himself together, as he would have termed it.

The cool sea-breeze that was blowing at the time refreshed and invigorated him; so that, when he returned home to dinner about one o'clock, he had almost entirely recovered from the baleful consequences of his imprudent extra indulgence overnight in Podmarsh's cheap champagne.

He was agreeably surprised to find that, during his absence, his wife's temper had also veered round to a more equable point of the domestic compass.

Mr. Brayson, however, commented upon Nina's absence from the dinner-table.

"Sulky little hussy!" said Madame Giuseppina, with something of a return to her former ill-humour; "she's still in her own room having her temper out, I suppose. She'll come down humble enough, by-and-by, when she's hungry."

"Well now, Peppina darling, I've been thinking we were just a little bit too hard on the girl. She really is a pretty rider, and one of our own family too, we must recollect that," continued Mr. Brayson, trying to act as peacemaker. "And she's worth money to us now, and Lisetta doesn't ride the *manége*, so that if Nina wasn't here we should have to engage someone else, and pay them at least four pounds a week."

"I've made up my mind to write to Mangles to-night," returned Madame Giuseppina obstinately; "I will not consent to see her set up above my own child."

"There will be no one to ride Brilliant."

"Teach Jemima. Plenty of young girls like her ride the *manége*. Nina did at that age."

"But that will take time; and Jemima hasn't Nina's courage."

"Jemima will never learn if she's never taught. She's quite old enough to be brought forward."

"Well now, look here, Peppina," argued Mr. Brayson, trying to reason with his stubborn wife. "We're just going into a new town, and they've had good circuses there before us. They're not fools either, so far north. We must have a good show to begin with; and we ought to have a nice-looking lot of ladies. And then Nina makes herself useful in the house. You'd feel quite at a loss without her."

"You'll have to do without her, at all events," said Madame Ginseppina, with a spiteful flash of her dark eyes. "If Nina is not here, Lisetta must superintend, of course."

"And that's just what I won't do," exclaimed Lisetta sulkily. "I attend to my own business

in the circus, and that's quite enough to see to, I'm sure."

"I should like to cook," interrupted Jemima, smacking her lips, "for then I'd have all the best bits to myself."

"Yes, and set the kitchen chimney on fire, as you did when you tried to make the toffy," retorts Lisetta.

"Come, girls, don't squabble," says Mr. Brayson. "Jemima, run and tell Nina I want to speak to her."

Jemima goes off, presently returning to say Nina is not upstairs.

"I told you she'd soon come down from her high horse," says Madame Giuseppina disdainfully. "She's in the kitchen, I daresay; she'd not starve herself to feed her pride, not she."

"No, ma, she's not in the kitchen, for I've been and looked, and Janet's seen nothing at all of her," volunteers Jemima. "I suppose she's took her hook off somewhere," finishes Master Jimmy, with a spice of her back-garden slang.

"Gone down to old Peter's for comfort and con-

solation and to have a good grumble at us," puts in Lisetta, giving Nina a little help in the wrong direction.

"She shall go there no more after to-day. Run and fetch her, Jemima," decides Madame Giuseppina, who agrees with the opinion entertained by Lisetta.

Jemima once fairly started on this errand, Mr. Brayson sets about indulging in his usual after-dinner nap, and Madame Giuseppina herself very soon follows his example. They are both indulging in an inharmonious, but most sonorously-sounding snoring duet, when back comes Jemima, breathless, flushed, and excited, bursting noisily into the room.

"She isn't there, ma. She hasn't been there all day. Peter says he hasn't seen her since Sunday; she wasn't there at all yesterday," she pours out as quickly as she can possibly speak the words.

Mr. Brayson wakes up with a prolonged snore; and Madame Giuseppina, opening her eyes, sits winking and blinking, mightily enraged at

having her peaceful slumbers thus rudely interrupted.

"Really, Jemima, you tiresome girl——" she begins.

"She's not there, ma, I tell you; Peter's not seen Nina at all to-day. I shouldn't wonder if she has gone right off and made a clean bolt of it; perhaps she's been and jumped off the pier, and drowned herself out of spite," finishes Jemima in her usual consolatory style.

"Not been to Peter's! Why, where on earth can she be?" inquires Madame Giuseppina, a little uneasy in spite of herself.

Mr. Brayson sits upon the sofa, crowned with the silk handkerchief he has tied round his head before going to sleep, gaping, and staring with surprise.

Jemima proceeds with her narration:

"There was old Peter and Little Bobbles as thick as thieves, laying their heads together, and of course I told 'em there'd been a jolly row, and that you were going to send her to old Mangles, and not let her ride here any more. And Little

Bobbles got up and capered about the room, laughing and crying like a fool as he is, and he said if Nina went he'd go too. And so I just told my lord he'd find he'll get it hot for his interference, for you were going to fine him a whole week's salary, and put his fine new things in the wardrobe, and use them for Lisetta."

"You—you told Little Bobbles all this?" exclaims Madame Giuseppina, fairly aghast at Jemima's imprudent chattering.

"Yes, I told them," replies Master Jimmy, swinging her hat backwards and forwards by the strings. "It's no more than the truth; I ain't been telling lies."

"What business had you to repeat any conversation between your father and myself?" thunders Madame Giuseppina in a fury, addressing the mischievous girl.

"Oh, well, I didn't know there was any harm," says Jemima, slightly disconcerted at her mother's evident displeasure. "You know you did say every word of it, ma; and if you go saying things you don't mean, how am I to know?"

With which speech delivered in her accustomed pert saucy manner, Master Jimmy thinks it expedient to make herself scarce, and vanishes at once.

"The naughty, bad, wicked girl!" ejaculates Madame Giuseppina as soon as all trace of Jemima has disappeared.

"It's not Jemima's fault, Peppina," retorts Mr. Brayson, taking his favourite daughter's part; "it's yours. You shouldn't talk so freely before the child. You let your passion run away with your good sense; your temper has carried you too far. And now, thanks to your stupid folly and contrariness, you'll very likely get us into a devil of a fix."

"Mr. Brayson, do you know who you are addressing?" inquires his wife with lofty dignity.

"Yes, madame, I do know," retorts Mr. Brayson, rising angrily and pacing up and down the room. "I'm addressing a d——d fool, madame, unfortunately for me; and there's the truth for you, whether you like it or not. Till now, it's been the fashion to sneer at me, to bully me,

to tell me I go about to public-houses getting drunk; but for all that Neddy Bray can manage to attend to his own business; Neddy Bray can perform his 'orses at night; Neddy Bray doesn't disappoint the public; Neddy Bray's up at the circus early every morning breaking his 'orses. The people believe in me and my 'orses. You're all very well in your place, but please to remember I'm the head of the concern. The buildings, the 'orses, everything belongs to me—money, property, all is mine. You've been taking a deal too much upon you of late, madame; you'll please from this time to keep yourself in your proper place. Neddy Bray isn't perhaps quite such a fool as he looks."

Madame Giuseppina is thunderstruck at this unlooked for outburst on the part of her husband. He is kicking over the traces with a vengeance, and worst of all, he knows perfectly well what he is about.

Mr. Brayson, noticing the effect of this unexpected burst of eloquence upon his wife, and secretly complimenting himself upon his firmness and courage, triumphantly proceeds:

"Just see what a pretty mess your d——d stupid tongue has got us into. To begin with, Nina's run clean off——"

"Nothing of the kind," interrupts Madame Giuseppina contemptuously. "She's trying to frighten you, that's all. She'll come back quietly enough when she's tired."

"Then you've been and done the trick with Little Bobbles," proceeds Mr. Brayson, ignoring his wife's speech. "And Little Bobbles is our trump card. We shall never get so good a clown again, and if he goes to Mangles, at this time too, whatever shall we do? He stays with us for next to nothing, either. Talk about your management, indeed! I'll be master at the circus, and in my house, too, after this, madame, or I'll precious soon manage to do without you altogether! And now listen to me. I'm going to see if I can find Nina."

Madame Giuseppina gives a sneering smile; she would speak if she dared, but for once she is afraid of her husband.

"You may sneer, madame, but if I succeed in

bringing her safe back again, I'll have her treated properly. She's of consequence to me—she's worth money. And she shall ride what I please, when I please, and be dressed as fine as I please, and she sha'n't be browbeaten in my circus to please you or anybody else. Make her useful at home if you choose, but understand I won't have her bullied."

"Mr. Brayson," says Madame Giuseppina, shaking with passion and speaking quickly and hurriedly with suppressed rage, "if you intend making more of this creature than you do of your own daughters——"

"I shall do what I please in my own house, madame," says Mr. Brayson, cutting her short; "and if you don't like it you can take yourself off out of it as soon as you like, and the sooner the better."

"Before you go, Mr. Brayson, you will perhaps hear what I have to say," returns his wife, rising in her turn.

"I've heard a great deal more than I like already. Ta, ta, Peppina," he goes on with a

comical swagger, kissing the tips of his fingers derisively at her. "I hope I shall find you in a better temper on my return."

Then, making his wife a grotesque and mock respectful bow, and putting his hat very much on one side of his head, he struts out of the room singing exultantly to himself:

When I go in
I'm sure to win,
Neddy Bray! Neddy Bray!

which elegant refrain he continues at the top of his voice until he has passed through the outer gate and is fairly lost to view.

## CHAPTER XI.

### NINA AND CARYLL.

It was some considerable time before Nina recovered herself sufficiently to be able to give Caryll a full account of the insulting threats and proposals of the cowardly Crosby St. Clair.

And even now, seated on her favourite rustic seat by his side, his arm thrown tenderly round her, her head resting lovingly upon his shoulder, she could not summon up sufficient courage to tell him of all Crosby's vile hints and treacherous insinuations.

The thought of probable disenchantment from the sweet spell of love that held her willing captive, that might perhaps follow such a reve-

lation, was too hard and bitter a trial for her to face as yet.

At last Caryll rouses her from her painful reverie.

"My darling," he says fondly, imprinting a kiss upon her smooth white forehead, "there is no time to lose; we must decide at once, or insuperable obstacles may be put in our way. Nina, I told you the other day I should exact a love brave enough to face, if necessary, the cruel sneers and scornful looks of that which is called the world. Search well your heart, and tell me, can you give me what I ask?"

His voice is low and earnest. As he speaks, he takes her sweet downcast face in his hands, raising it that he may look, as it were, into her very soul through the lustrous depths of her soft brown eyes.

"Oh, Caryll, my love, can you still doubt?" murmurs Nina, with gentle reproach.

"And you have never loved before?" he asks, with sudden jealousy, with momentary distrust.

"Never! never! I did not know what love was till I saw you."

"My beautiful, darling Nina!" he says admiringly.

"And you, Caryll?" she inquires with timid hesitation; "have you ever loved anyone before?"

It is done, it is over—the question she has been longing to ask, yet dreading to utter, has at length gone forth.

How gladly would she recall her words! How wistfully she looks up at Caryll's face, with what an anxious beating heart does she await his reply.

She feels his arms for one short moment relax in their embrace, whilst a spasm as of pain seems to shoot through his frame.

Alas! it sounds the death-knell to her hopes. It brings with it confirmation of Crosby St. Clair's vile calumnies.

She turns cold and faint; her eyes grow dim and misty, a confused murmuring noise echoes in her ears; feebly she tries to rise and free herself from her lover's embrace; but the next moment

falls a shower of passionate kisses, and Caryll clasps her yet more fondly to his heart.

"My own Nina!" he says tenderly, "rest satisfied you are my first, my only love!"

"Is it so, really, Caryll?" she questions presently, in soft cooing accents. "Are you quite sure you have never even fancied that you loved before?"

"I never really loved before, Nina," returns Caryll, with a tinge of sadness and sternness in his tone; "but I was at one time dazzled by a woman's artfully displayed beauty, as a silly moth is dazzled by the cruel flame that lures it to destruction. This woman was high-born, the rage, the pastime of the hour. Everyone raved of her beauty and perfection. I was flattered by her preference, fooled like a senseless idiot by her artful fascinations, her practised coquetry, her feigned tenderness! At length, when she grew tired of her new victim, and had paraded her fresh conquest sufficiently before the world, she threw me off with cold indifference and haughty disdain. But Nina, darling, I never loved any but you in all my life!"

"And her name?" murmurs Nina, with a restless feeling she cannot entirely master, as she hears Caryll speak of this woman's beauty and fascination.

"Her name! But why does my little Nina wish to hear it? She will never cross her path. This woman was Lord Eaglesworth's daughter, the Hon. Edelgitha Amyott!"

"I am so glad," says Nina softly.

"You are glad, Nina!" exclaims Caryll in surprise. "But why?"

"Caryll, that odious man Mr. St. Clair told me you loved this woman, loved her still. I would not believe it; I would not listen to him. But although I tried to seem so brave, my heart died within me when I thought it might perhaps be true."

"My darling," says Caryll a little impatiently, "the time is going, and we have as yet decided nothing. You have every trust and confidence in me, Nina?"

"Yes," murmurs Nina with simple, loving faith.

"Then if so, why return again to the Braysons at all? What is to prevent our leaving Tayside by to-night's mail for London, and from thence to the Continent? Come with me, now, at once. No need for preparation or delay; everything necessary can be procured upon our arrival in London, and before this time to-morrow we shall be on our way to Paris."

"To-night! must it be so soon?" whispers Nina, half alarmed at the suddenness of his proposal, although she herself has contemplated the same step only a few short hours ago.

"With me, my darling, you are safe," says Caryll, persuasively. "Once return to Madame Brayson, and I may not be able to hear from or see you. My dear child," he goes on with tender earnestness, "I told you you would have to come to me before your people left this place; a few days sooner or later cannot greatly signify. You shall never repent your choice, my darling; nothing shall ever vex or harm my pure, soft dove, when once she gives me the sweet privilege of guarding and protecting her future life."

Nina hesitates a little. It seems terribly sudden, now that it has come at last. And yet it is, as she well knows, the only way to safety.

At last she lifts her face to his, with a blushing confiding smile, and putting her tiny little hand in his, she murmurs in low fluttering accents:

"Yes, I will come, I will leave Tayside with you to-night; I will not return again to madame's house."

"My love! my darling! my very own Nina!" cries Caryll with fierce, triumphant, overwhelming joy, catching her in his arms and covering her with kisses.

"But you will let me bid good-bye to poor old Peter," she says with a tinge of regret at the thought of leaving her faithful old friend.

"Better not bid anyone good-bye, Nina," replies Caryll. "Write to the poor old fellow, and come with me now. We will take the train to the first town where the mail stops, and get away at once from Tayside. There is no time to lose."

And Nina rises to her feet, settling the poor injured little Dido comfortably in her arms, yielding

to his request, and fully prepared to trust her life and future in his hands.

How near, how fatally near the edge of the precipice is this poor child! What can save her now?

And yet Caryll is not altogether unscrupulous, not wholly base.

For he loves Nina devotedly, and honestly intends that the whole aim and study of his life shall be the promotion of her happiness.

Yet, loving her madly, passionately, and withal sincerely too, can he deliberately try to win her young heart, with its golden harvest of innocence and simple trustful love, in black deceitfulness, with treacherous craftiness, made still more guilty by reason of her perfect faith in his truth and honour?

Alas! Caryll Gordon is by no means an ideal hero, for he is a man. Coward enough to fear the world, to shrink before its opinion and verdict.

Meanwhile Nina walks along contentedly by her lover's side, stroking little Dido's silky ears, too much occupied with her own thoughts to speak, the

rosy blushes chasing one another swiftly over her soft cheeks.

"Are we to take that gigantic animal with us, Nina?" inquires Caryll, noticing Dido now for the first time.

"Yes; I must take her, Caryll," she says, pleading for her little favourite. "I cannot leave the poor little thing behind."

"My darling, if you had twenty lap-dogs you should take them all if you wished," says Caryll magnanimously, very well contented, however, to think that there is only one.

Thus they continue to walk on together towards the town. Caryll looking proudly and admiringly at her, indulging in all sorts of fond dreams and foolish fancies, picturing to himself his little Nina, not plainly dressed as she is now, but glittering and sparkling with precious gems, herself the most brilliant jewel of them all.

Then he thinks of his gift to her.

"Nina darling," he says as this thought strikes him, "you can wear the ring I gave you now without fear—the ring and the ear-rings too.

Where are they? Let me place them in your ears, and see how pretty you look in them. Ah, my pet shall soon have jewels more worthy of her to wear than these."

A sudden nameless horror comes over Nina as Caryll speaks these last few careless words.

Instinctively she pauses, and gives a wild appealing glance at Caryll, as if to search far down into the very depths of his soul, and read her sentence there.

One little moment she stands gazing fixedly upon his face, that little moment to her containing centuries of bitter anguish and suspense; then she falters, and would have fallen, but Caryll catches her tenderly in his arms.

"Caryll—dearest Caryll! My first, my last, my only love!" she cries wildly, "Heaven knows how truly I love you."

Then she tears herself from him, and mastering herself with a powerful effort, tries to smile.

"There is something I must say now, at once, before I leave," she says in a low husky voice, very unlike her usual bell-like tones; "some-

thing I entirely forgot, until you spoke about the diamond ear-rings. Put your arm round me once more; kiss me again, one last kiss, and then, if after what I am about to say all comes to an end between us"—here she nearly breaks down—"I shall yet have known one bright short moment of true and perfect happiness."

Caryll takes her in his arms and kisses her fondly, wondering what her words may mean.

"Caryll," she commences in a clear, distinct, but very low voice, "I heard a story a few days ago which strangely reminds me at this moment of myself. It was about a circus-rider, the same perhaps as I, only she was very, very beautiful —fatally so. She too had a lover—had loved in secret as I have done; like myself, she had accepted presents from him, a pair of diamond ear-rings amongst the rest—such as these. As you do now, so did her lover persuade her to fly with him. Alas! she trusted him, and fled her father's house. All—all—her little world she freely gave for him, even herself. But, Caryll, he deceived her! Betrayed and deserted by him,

she died heartbroken, for though she left all and everything for him, he did not marry her. She was not his wife."

As Nina finishes her sad story, her voice sinks lower and lower, and she buries her face in her hands to hide her tears, to stifle the sobs that threaten to break forth.

Caryll still holds her tenderly in his arms, fully comprehending her meaning, perfectly understanding at last why it is she tells him all this.

"Hush, hush, Nina!" he says caressingly; "because one man is a villain, must all men be vile? Nina, I swear most solemnly, by all I hold sacred, I will never, never desert you. I will never break the priceless treasure of your heart. It is not the shelter of a loving father's roof you leave for me. Did I not ask if your love was firm and steadfast, ready to brave all for my sake, as I gladly yield up all for yours?"

"But, Caryll, no breath of evil, no taint of shame must rest upon my memory when I am gone from here. I am only a poor girl—a circus-

rider; not a lady, as it is called; but my reputation and character must be held pure and stainless; and, Caryll, how will they know I am indeed your wife when I am far away from here?"

"I tell you, Nina, you must trust to me," Caryll urges, a little impatiently. "What matters it what people say or think? And, Nina, I swear you shall never have cause to regret it. No husband has ever been more devoted, faithful, and true than I will be to you. Wealth, happiness, everything my love has power to bestow shall be yours, my darling. It is only——"

Here he hesitates in spite of himself. How, after all, shall he tell her? Yet he feels he must do so now, for he is not utterly dishonourable.

"Only—what?" asks Nina, half reassured by her lover's ardour, yet still doubting these last few words of his.

"Everything of real value or consequence I possess in the world shall be yours, my darling—all and everything except my name."

"Ah," exclaims Nina, with a long-drawn sigh like one waking from a troubled dream. "And

you are sure you love me, so much, so very much?"

But her voice has a hard, unnatural ring. In these few moments it seems aged ten years.

Caryll is overjoyed. He thinks surely the bitterness is past; the dangerous rock he feared his love might split upon is safely tided over. Once more he presses her fondly to him, she unresisting like one in a dream.

"My darling," he murmurs fondly, "I love you more than anything in the whole world beside. More than my life itself!"

And perhaps in all this, just now, he is perfectly sincere.

Because he loves Nina at the present moment he deems it impossible for him to be faithless to her in the future.

What is he more than any other man of ordinary type? Variable as a weathercock, liable to be swayed round by the first puff of adroit flattery wafted towards him by a pretty woman's breath.

And in his self-sufficient pride he thinks that

in exacting all he does, he requires no real sacrifice from this innocent child. Will he not always be with her to shield and cherish her? How can the gibing sneers, the mocking insults of the world affect her when he is at her side? How can the vile breath of slander sully her young life, or the cruel taunts of those in heart less pure than she have power to harm her when he is there to watch over and protect her?

He cannot marry her, true; but what of that? He will never marry anyone else. They will live together somewhere abroad, and no one need ever be the wiser.

Why can he not marry her? Because he is cowardly enough to fear the world, to shrink before its adverse opinion and verdict. Because he would be ashamed to let society know that he, Caryll Gordon, had married a little provincial circus-girl.

"Come, dearest, do you still hesitate?" he says caressingly, feeling assured in his own mind that Nina's silence is but the last faint struggle of maidenly reserve.

"More than your life, you love me," repeats Nina dreamily. "And all you possess in the world you give to me?" she goes on questioning in a strange, odd kind of way.

"All, all, my darling, I swear it!" cries Caryll with wild triumphant joy. "You shall not have the barren promise of my word alone. The money shall be legally settled on you; no one shall be able to wrest it from you. What is the value of a name? The mere empty breath that forms a sound, does that bring honour to a man? Without wealth and worldly advantages what would there be to court in the possession of the proudest name?"

"Not much, perhaps," says Nina faintly; "and yet the want of it means shame, dishonour, and disgrace. Caryll," she goes on, springing from his arms, "Caryll, how could you think me so worthless, so despicable, so utterly base and vile?"

"What is this?" cries Caryll in anger and surprise at Nina's sudden outburst, at the very moment of all others when he was secretly con-

gratulating himself upon her extremely common-sense view of the matter.

"Is it because I dared to meet you secretly, to trust your words, to receive your gifts, that you have done me this cruel wrong? Is this your love? And I, weak, foolish, ignorant girl that I am, I believed you, I listened to you, I loved you. Alas! I love you still; would that I did not! Oh, would to Heaven that I did not!"

"Nina, listen to me; you are speaking wildly, rashly," interrupts Caryll, attempting to place his arm once more round her.

"Do not touch me!" she cries, retreating from him almost in horror. "All is over. It is finished. Take back these glittering gifts with which you basely thought I could be bought. Oh, I have shown my love too plainly. I have been too easily won. Take back your false vows and promises of love. Would that I could take back my love as well."

And she gives a great gasping sob as if her very heart were breaking.

"I cannot let you go. I will not part with

you. It is too late," says Caryll fiercely. "You must come with me now. You shall be my wife, Nina, you shall indeed, only come with me. Why torture me like this? We will be married when we get to London. Calm yourself, love; all shall be as you wish. You will trust me. You do believe me, Nina?"

"No!" cries Nina with a shudder. "I dare believe in you no more; I have been too rudely awakened from my short dream of happiness to trust again, to put faith in anything you say. And to think that man spoke the truth," she continues with bitterness of heart. "Are then all men alike? Do they love but to destroy?"

"Nina, you shall be my wife as soon as the license can be procured," he says earnestly. "I will not attempt to screen myself. I have acted unworthily. But I did not imagine for one moment you would take it like this. It is not too late, darling. All shall be remedied. Courage. Come. The time is going fast. Nina love, come!"

"I dare not! I dare not!" says Nina hopelessly. "I am more weak and foolish than I

thought. I but prolong my anguish in staying here, and yet I feel I cannot bear to part from you. But it must be. Oh, Caryll, my life is ruined, you have broken my heart! I can only pray that death may come and bring me welcome and speedy release. Farewell, my cruel, cruel love. Farewell—farewell for ever!"

Then, without daring to trust herself to look at him again, she turns from him, running swiftly some short distance down the road until it turns into the street leading to the town, and she is lost to sight.

Whilst Caryll slowly and gloomily follows in the direction she has taken, feeling greatly discomfited, deeply conscience-stricken, and bitterly ashamed.

## CHAPTER XII.

### NINA'S DESPAIR.

When Nina ran down the road in her uncontrollable grief and misery, after her last sad interview with Caryll, she fled along heedlessly, unmindfully, she knew not whither.

All ways to her then seemed alike; her mind was feasting on its own great sorrow, and outward things were disregarded or unnoticed in the immensity of the anguish and torture inflicted by the discovery of her lover's unworthiness.

The road she took led her beyond the dreary line of docks, along a desolate sandy shore; the river here was widening fast in its approach towards the sea; the country people, indeed, already spoke of it as such, for the waters were

salt, and huge bunches of seaweed were brought up and left upon its banks by its advancing and receding tides.

It was an untrodden, unfrequented, desolate place, a very desert on a small scale, smelling of the salt seaweed that lay dotted over it in straggling heaps, and held in undisputed possession by multitudes of sea-gulls, who, at low tide, flocked in countless numbers to feast upon the garbage of the sea, left by the ebbing waters or entangled among the drifting masses of seaweed.

It was late in the afternoon now, and growing cold. Damp, too, as it always seems by the sea at this season of the year.

But Nina felt it not.

She had not eaten since the morning, yet she was not hungry. She was only conscious of a reckless craving to wander and wander on even out of the very world itself.

But all things human come to an end, and so did the relentless energy of this poor child's despair.

Her strength failing her, she sinks at last,

wearied and exhausted on the cold wet sands. Not senseless, unhappily she is all too sadly conscious of her grief and sorrow.

How could Caryll be so cruel as to deceive her thus?

Her simple, girlish inexperience had led her to believe him to be everything that was noble, truthful, and honourable.

Yet weighed in the balance, how sadly was he found wanting!

And this man she had made the very idol of her heart. Alas! poor child, he was her idol still.

But now she must resolutely tear out his image from her mind; she must think of him no more.

The light transient gleam of happiness that had transformed her cheerless life into a very Paradise, had faded out for ever, leaving behind it the black desolation of despair.

She looks round her with a shudder. She is alone, away from all human aid, comfort, and advice. Alone! with her bitter temptation growing

upon her, in the black gloom and midnight of her helpless sorrow.

Yet not alone; for with her there is still one faithful little friend.

Unable to understand what it is that troubles her kind protectress and mistress, yet conscious, in her doggy mind, that something very serious is the matter, the little animal crept up to Nina, trying to lick her face and hands in token of mute sympathy and affection, giving a little faint whine of distress.

Then Nina rose, and taking her little favourite once more in her arms, walked down to meet the waters.

The tiny wavelets murmured gently as they flowed towards her, singing a soft lullaby to the sleeping river beyond.

How happy and peaceful! How free from misery and anguish such as hers seemed the placid waters as they flowed onward, ever onward to the sea.

If she were but at rest! At rest beneath their concealing veil.

For what can life bring her now but grief, unhappiness, despair?

Why should she wish to live?

A few short moments and all would be over, and she sleeping peacefully, quietly, at rest, her weary toil ended, her grief forgotten, no further trouble to assail and overwhelm her.

The daylight was fast departing, twilight deepening, night drawing on apace.

The fatal day was dying that had brought death to her love.

Let all die there together. Let all be buried at once and for ever in the dark grave of the past.

Sadly and mournfully she takes his much prized letter from her breast.

Kneeling, she reads it once again, kissing it repeatedly, and praying for the welfare and happiness of the cruel hand that penned it.

Then, slowly, with reluctant fingers, she tears it into innumerable fragments, and casts them fluttering upon the receding wavelets at her feet, that are to bear them out to the vast ocean world beyond.

Only herself left now to follow the scattered relics of her love; and neither he nor anyone else in the wide world will ever know the sad secret of her untimely death.

Gently she places little Dido on the sands at her feet. The sands are wet and cold, and the little dog whines pitifully, looking up wistfully in the young girl's face.

Nina takes off her shawl, and wrapping the little animal up in it, bids her favourite good-bye; then, turning round, she takes her last farewell of earth, and falling on her knees, lifts her eyes to heaven in one last prayer.

But suddenly she starts to her feet with a cry of horror and dismay.

Prayer! What has such as she to do with prayer? How dare she pray?

How dare she ever hope to rejoin her mother's pure and spotless spirit with hands stained with the crime of taking her own life?

Will not the commission of such a deed banish her from all hope of heaven? Will it not seal her everlasting condemnation?

Her life is not her own to take. It is a loan, a gift from God.

Has He not said: "As thy day, so shall be thy strength."

Does not He who permits the temptation, also with the temptation provide a way to escape?

With a wild cry of anguish she casts herself upon the sands, bursting into a torrent of bitterly repentant tears.

She thinks of her dear mother looking upon her from her starry home, still guarding, still protecting her, still with her angel blessing shielding her from harm.

And then she meekly prays for strength to support the heavy burden that she, alas! must bear in secret and alone, buried in the lowest depths of her sorely wounded heart the whole course of her dreary life to come; whilst little Dido creeps once more to Nina's side, for the tide has turned, and the waves are flowing round the shawl in which she has been so carefully wrapped.

And Nina thinks repoachfully how, in the guilty

selfishness of her grief, she would have left this poor little dumb animal to perish miserably in this lonely desolate spot.

Once more raising her little favourite in her arms, and taking her shawl, wet with the flowing waters of the tide, she turns, and leaving alike her love and her despair in that wild solitude, heart-broken, weary, yet resigned in spirit, she retraces her faltering steps in the direction of the town.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### GERALD AND CARYLL.

In the quaint, old-fashioned, oak-wainscoted chamber at the pretty rectory, which the Rev. Marcus Woolrych had chosen as his study, Gerald Gordon sits one afternoon, occupied in making notes for his sermon on the following Sunday.

As he finishes his task, he sinks back in his easy-chair, and the thought steals across his mind that his sermon next Sunday will, in all human probability, be the last he will ever preach from that pulpit.

Gerald does not deceive himself. He knows the delicate fragile thread of his existence is growing slighter and slighter, with subtle and insidious progress.

There is no actual suffering, no positive disease. It is simply a gradual wasting languor and weariness, that medical aid is powerless to resist or conquer, and that is slowly but surely sapping his vital energies.

Unmurmuringly, even cheerfully, he accepts what he knows to be inevitable.

And now he falls into a peacefully solemn, a sweetly mournful reverie, in which thoughts and affections of earth merge into holier themes and aspirations, forming a shadowy and dreamy foretaste of that better land whose blissful shores he knows full well that he is fast approaching.

But this reverie is suddenly and abruptly interrupted.

A hasty step is at the door. The handle is quickly turned, and Caryll Gordon somewhat impatiently and brusquely enters the room.

It needs little penetration to see that there is something very seriously wrong with Caryll.

He is by no means an adept in the art of concealing his feelings; and ever since a boy he

has been in the habit of confiding to his elder brother all his difficulties and troubles.

Little wonder then is it that he should seek him now.

Gerald looks up with his usual cheerful tranquil smile.

"Ah, Caryll!" he says as he takes his brother's hand, "this is kind of you. We haven't seen much of you lately, and next week I return to Castle Gordon, so that if you really decide upon your winter tour, I fear we shall not have the opportunity of seeing much more of one another, this year at all events."

A cloud settles on Caryll's brow as Gerald mentions his winter tour. He throws himself negligently into the chair near his brother, and looks gloomily into the fire.

"I don't think it's very kind of me, dear old fellow," he says presently, looking up affectionately at his brother, "to force myself upon you in this rough unceremonious fashion. I'm little better than a bear, I know, and a selfish brute

into the bargain, Gerald. I don't think half enough of you when all goes well, but directly there's anything amiss, I come to you for consolation and advice."

"Well, that's as it should be, Caryll," returns Gerald mildly. "When all goes well we don't want friends, but when difficulties arise, we have an opportunity of discovering who our true friends really are."

"At any rate you have always been a true friend to me, dear old boy," says Caryll, grasping his brother's hand; "you've been the peacemaker over and over again for me with the governor, and helped me in all sorts of troubles and dilemmas as well. Whenever I'm in any difficulty I come to you."

"Well, we've got as far as the difficulty," replies Gerald encouragingly; "but, until I know of what it consists, I'm afraid I shall not be of much use."

"To tell you the truth, Gerald, I've made a confounded ass of myself; nay, it's even worse than that, for I've acted like a blackguard and

a villain. I don't disguise it from myself in the least. I deserve all your priestly indignation, and that sort of thing; and even then you would not blame or condemn me half so much as I blame and condemn myself."

And Caryll recommences looking gloomily into the fire.

Gerald's face wears a graver and more serious expression.

"Tell me all about it, Caryll, whatever it may be; if your regret be sincere, recollect the error is already more than half atoned for. You are thoughtless, impetuous, and volatile, but I am quite confident my brother would not be guilty of a dishonourable action."

"I have been guilty of a most dishonourable action," says Caryll moodily, and with dogged pertinacity, as if he took a grim pleasure in thus reviling and accusing himself. "Oh, set your mind at rest, dear old fellow," he adds, for he sees the look of dismay that his words conjure up on Gerald's face, "I have not done anything dishonourable as the world chooses to class the

word. It is just this, Gerald. Since coming to this place, I met—accidentally, in the first instance—a sweet young creature, artless and inexperienced in worldly matters as a wild bird in the woods. From the moment I first set eyes upon her, I was fascinated, even unknown to myself. She formed such a contrast to all other women I had ever met. But she was not in what you would consider my own station of life. Chance favoured me with opportunities for improving her acquaintance. The more I saw of her, the more I found to interest and admire; admiration grew into love—strong, ardent, passionate love, that would not be subdued, that would not be denied, and then, I discovered that she too loved me, that I had won her heart. I tried to reason with myself, but it was too late. I knew she was—well, what the world would call beneath me; that if I could not marry her, I ought not to trifle with her feelings. On my word, Gerald, I meant honestly and even honourably by her, as my mad passion prompted me at that time to believe. I couldn't

formally marry her, but I was fully determined I would never marry anyone else, and I would have settled the whole of my fortune on her if necessary in pledge of my good faith. I am only the younger son, Gerald," continues Caryll with a sickly attempt at a smile, "you are the heir; you will inherit Castle Gordon; you are the head of the family after our father's death."

Gerald sighed. "We have but the present in which to work, neither the past nor the future belong to us. This unhappy girl then loves you, Caryll," continued his brother; "you have been successful in gaining her affections, and she has also discovered your true intentions?"

"Yes, it is even as bad as that, Gerald. You see, I have never at any time set myself up for being very serious or religious. Most people do. It is considered the correct thing just now, but I hate hypocrisy. I did not think she would take my conduct in such a serious light. I cannot bear to think of it. I have destroyed her faith in me, abused her trustful innocence. I have perhaps even broken her heart!"

And Caryll, quite overcome, buries his face in his hands, whilst Gerald with grave yet tender concern contemplates his younger brother a few moments before he speaks in reply.

"Is not this indeed the heir? Is it not my brother who in a few short months, according to all human probability, will take my place when the world and its belongings shall know me no more. How then to counsel him fairly, impartially, conscientiously, as I ought?"

But Caryll seems impatient of the train of thought into which Gerald has unconsciously fallen, interpreting it to his own condemnation.

Raising his head from his hands, he says with a bitter smile:

"Just what I might have expected, Gerald! Too much even for your charity and patience. Well, I have sown the wind, I have no right to complain if I reap the whirlwind."

Then with a weary sigh he gets up from his chair, mechanically taking his hat, as he holds out his hand to his brother.

"Good-bye, old fellow," he says; "I've dis-

turbed and worried you, and done myself no good. I think there's a fate about all and everything I do, for I seem to bring nothing but unhappiness and ill-luck to all and everyone, myself included. Good-bye, Gerald. I shall be off somewhere or other, I suppose, as soon as possible after this."

But Gerald retains his brother's hand, and, taking his hat from him, replaces it on the library table.

"Don't go yet, Caryll; let us see what can be done to remedy the evil," he says, in a kind and sympathetic voice. "You are sure the poor girl loves you?"

"But too well! I would give all I possess in the world at this moment, willingly, to be certain she did not!"

So speaks Caryll in his rash, impetuous, unreasoning way.

"And her station in life—is it, then, so very far beneath your own?" inquires Gerald, with a slight hesitation, as he draws near the vital point at issue.

"As the world judges, yes," says Caryll, decidedly. "As I judge, she is as far above me as is the heaven above the earth."

Rash, impetuous, unreasoning Caryll still.

"So you think just now, Caryll," replies Gerald; "but I want a plain matter-of-fact view of the subject. What is she?"

"I fear that I shall shock you, Gerald," says Caryll, with a bitter smile. "She belongs to a race of professional showpeople, just perhaps one remove from strolling acrobats, street tumblers, or gipsies. She is the niece of the man whose circus is exhibiting at the present moment in Tayside."

"Not Nina!—not Miss Woolrych's little friend and *protégé*!" corrected Gerald, an indescribable expression settling upon his face, the tone of his voice giving evidence of surprise, pain, almost of horror.

"Yes, it is no other than Nina," replies Caryll, looking up in astonishment at his brother, for he fails to understand the sudden shock this revelation seems to have occasioned. "Of course

you are disgusted and horrified! It is only what I anticipated you would be."

"Poor child! poor child!" murmurs Gerald softly to himself.

"And naturally you consider her very far beneath me, and all that sort of thing," continues Caryll, with petulant impatience.

Gerald, after a moment's pause, turns his head towards his brother and looks calmly at him.

"From your point of view I think so, decidedly. There can be no two opinions in the matter."

"Her mother was an English lady, and of good family."

"Possibly; but she was only a poor curate's daughter and a governess. Another and a very serious disqualification."

"Then you consider——"

"I consider," says Gerald gravely, "that this poor child is very much beneath you in point of worldly station; that, according to the rules by which you elect to be guided, she would be no fitting wife for you; in short, that such a union could not possibly prove suitable or happy."

"Gerald!" cries Caryll in utter astonishment, "you are the very last person I should have anticipated to find professing such opinions."

"You imagined I should say, 'You have done this girl a grievous wrong. She loves you. Repair the error in the only way you can by making her your wife.'"

"I did honestly think so, Gerald," says Caryll, completely at a loss to understand his brother's line of argument; "and indeed, I proposed doing so of my own accord. I offered to marry her, but it was too late. She could place confidence in me no longer. Yet she does love me, with all her heart and soul; and I feel that I love her more than rank, wealth, fame, more even than my life itself."

"You think so now, but in a few years' time would it be the same? You are rash, headstrong, impetuous, and unreasoning. Have patience a little with me, Caryll," says Gerald, for he notices the latter's quick gesture of displeasure. "Let me fully explain my meaning. You are surprised at my expression of opinion as to suitable and un-

suitable marriages; but it is the persistent avoidance of this consideration, it is the perpetual ignoring of this most important subject, the refusal to regard this vital principle in its true light, that causes so much domestic misery, so many unhappy exposures, especially in the higher circles; leading at last to guilt, ay, even crime."

"But really, Gerald, this does not seem to bear upon the case at issue," interrupts Caryll impatiently.

"Wait a little, my dear boy. In marrying you choose a companion for life, one whom you hope will make you happy."

"And Nina would be a companion, she would make me happy," exclaims Caryll enthusiastically.

"Stay a moment, Caryll; such a step is not to be taken rashly, blindly, in the dark; you ought to have as much insight as possible into the character, tastes, and inclinations of your future wife. Nature is a faithful instructress, if we only condescend to apply the lessons she would teach. The eagle proudly winging his fearless upward flight, undazzled by the golden glory of the noon

day sun, towards his eyrie high among the barren crags of his bleak mountain home, could not exist in that sweet shady sylvan grove that shelters the softly cooing dove and wild wood-pigeon. The lion, awful in his savage majesty, fierce monarch of his native forest jungle, proudly roaring over his prey, loses all kingly dignity when shorn of these surroundings, and in captivity becomes even contemptible. All things in nature harmonise; without that no true happiness is possible. And now we come to suitability."

Caryll winced, and moved uneasily on his chair, he felt irritated in spite of himself at his brother's adverse view of the case.

Gerald, apparently quite unconscious of his brother's impatience, calmly proceeded:

"We will suppose an instance similar to yours, a dairymaid——"

"Thank you," mentally ejaculated Caryll. "My little Nina is not quite that."

"Fresh from her cows, her milk-pail and her churn, with no carefully cultured artificial tastes, where would she be if suddenly raised

to the position of a gentleman's wife, and placed as mistress over his household to superintend its surroundings and requirements? Too late to undergo the toilsome task of educating her mind to the level of his, unable from ignorance to understand or converse upon even the ordinary topics of the day, unfitted to move among her husband's circle of friends and acquaintances or worthily to do the honours of his house, she feels herself, from the very first, in a false position, and sooner or later her husband, tired of her pretty face, and wearied of that rustic simplicity he once thought her greatest charm, becomes fretful, disappointed, impatient, and disgusted with his humble choice. And yet is she to blame? But if a man of wealth and position love a well-trained, virtuous girl, inferior, perhaps, in station, who yet possesses natural intelligence, a sufficiently educated mind, and, above all, that rich gift of adaptability that the true sympathy of women's love so often teaches her, then I would say, 'What matters that she is poor? you are rich enough for both. What matters lowly birth, provided hers be honest? She

has intelligence, and will mould her tastes, and train her mind to the level of your own. She will make a fitting companion for you; one that you may fearlessly transplant into your own sphere. No need to hesitate. Marry her, if you truly love her, if she truly loves you. Poor and humble though she be, she will yet prove a rich and priceless treasure.'"

"And Nina is all this, and even more!" exclaims Caryll triumphantly. "Oh, Gerald," he goes on excitedly, "if you only knew her as well as I do, you would be in love with her yourself."

Gerald moves wearily on his chair; evidently the interview has been too much for his strength. He turns to his younger brother with a sweet, sad smile, and taking his hand, presses it affectionately in his.

"Caryll," he says, "if you are blessed in the possession of the love of this sweet young girl, do not abuse the precious gift. Be kind to her, cherish her, do not be merely misled by a pretty,

artless, winning face. Examine well your heart. If it be Heaven's will that you love her, that she loves you, may Heaven's blessing rest upon and sanctify your choice. Judged by my standard, she is worthy of you in every way, and were I in your place, I should not hesitate to act as I now counsel you. Make her your wife; you have my earnest prayers for the happiness of you both."

"Gerald—dear, noble, good old Gerald," exclaims Caryll joyfully, just because his brother's finally expressed opinion happens to jump with his own.

But his joy is of short duration, as he remembers how distrustfully Nina received his offer, and how she refused to listen to him again.

"But," he recommences, with discouragement and doubt in his voice, "she has refused to listen to me, to believe in me again. Oh, Gerald," he continues, turning to his brother, "if you were to see her, she would at least believe you, and you could tell her all. I should feel as if a double blessing

rested upon our union if you were to join our hands."

Gerald smiles faintly, his face is paler than before, an agonised expression settles on it, he seems a prey to great mental suffering.

"God willing, Caryll," he says, pressing his brother's hand, "I will do even that."

"Heaven bless you, old fellow, you have set me on my legs once more," begins Caryll exultantly; but his triumphant happy look changes to one of blank dismay, for, as he stoops to bid his brother good-bye, Gerald's face grows ashy pale, he sinks back in his chair, and to his undisguished alarm, Caryll sees that he has fainted.

The trial has been too much for the frail earthly tenement that holds captive Gerald's noble soul.

The one tender object of interest, this sweet young girl, who, unknown to him, had grown upon his heart, he finds the prize of another, and that other his own brother.

But it is the will of Heaven, and Heaven grant

that Caryll may be duly mindful and tender of his precious treasure.

And may Heaven's blessing attend them both.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### THE RETURN OF THE WANDERER.

When Mr. Brayson left his house in search of Nina, he was quite sure in his own mind that he should have no difficulty whatever in finding her; and he proceeded very composedly to old Peter's lodgings, fully believing that she was hiding there, and that Jemima had been quietly packed off with an excuse. His consternation and alarm were great indeed upon finding that young lady's story perfectly correct, and that neither Peter or Little Bobbles had seen anything at all of her.

Little Bobbles thought it the correct thing to offer consolation to Mr. Brayson in the shape of an unopened bottle of whisky; a consolation by no means disregarded by the little circus-

proprietor, who under its potent influence became in due time discursive.

He confidentially related all the circumstances attending Nina's flight, dilating grandly on his stormy interview with his wife; so that when at length Mr. Brayson left Peter's lodgings his head was in its normal state of semi-confused intoxication, which Madame Giuseppina immediately perceived, and was not slow in turning to her own advantage.

Meanwhile, Little Bobbles was very seriously concerned and alarmed at Nina's disappearance. So also was Peter, but in a far different way.

For Peter remembered with an aching heart the night she had come to pay her usual visit with the diamonds sparkling in her ears, and how she had afterwards confessed her love for the young stranger, the hero of her adventure in the wood.

Little Bobbles looked somewhat ruefully at the more than half-emptied bottle of whisky as he replaced it in the cupboard. Mr. Brayson

had certainly indulged pretty freely at the little man's expense.

Then feeling restless and uneasy he went to the window and looked up and down the narrow street in hopes of seeing something of Nina; but it was now dark, and not finding much satisfaction to be derived from this sort of amusement he began scratching his head with an air of unmistakable perplexity and concern, finally coming back and resuming his seat close by old Peter, who sat silent and thoughtful, his head leaning on his hand.

So he waited until after tea, hoping Peter might commence the subject. Disappointed in this, however, after numerous spasmodic attempts to speak which all ended in nothing, and further scratching at his head as if in search of an idea, he suddenly burst out:

"I say, Peter, do you think she's run right away, and that we shall never see anything more of her?"

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed Peter fervently.

"Perhaps she's run away to join another

circus?" continued Little Bobbles, scratching harder than ever, as if he were thoroughly resolved upon uprooting an idea; but finding Peter did not reply he sat still a few minutes longer.

"Peter, don't you think I'd better go to the police-station, and have bills put out offering a reward. They always do that if a dog's stolen, you know, or a child's lost. I'd give five pounds gladly enough, and think it cheap too, to see Miss Nina standing here safe and sound, for I can't help thinking that it was I who got her into all this trouble. It was those unlucky things that caused the mischief, and I'm sure I thought it would please her. And she's never even thanked me!" added the little fellow in a melancholy voice, bursting into tears.

"It's a cruel, bitter world!" murmured Peter, not seeming to heed Little Bobbles, "especially to this poor unprotected orphan child!"

"I wish she'd got someone who would protect her," said Little Bobbles, evidently trying to work out some difficult problem. "But who could,

Peter? Only a husband! She couldn't leave the Braysons unless she had a home of her own! Only fancy Miss Nina married! Why, there ain't any of us half good enough for her, and yet if she didn't have one of us I'm sure I don't know where she'd get a husband at all!" And Little Bobbles stopped and seemed to be puzzling the matter over in his own mind.

"I wish she'd let me protect her," he went on by-and-by, looking up with a bright flash of genius, as if he had successfully unearthed his idea at last. "I think I'm about the best she could have of all our lot, and I'm sure I'd be very proud to protect her." With all his good intentions the simple little fellow couldn't have protected a mouse. "I'm a careful man; I don't drink," he went on, enumerating the advantages he had to offer; "I've saved a little money, and I make all my own dresses. Oh, Peter, do you think she would listen to me?"

Peter looked up at the kind-hearted, foolish little man.

Grotesque, in spite of the trouble and anxiety

he experienced on his young mistress's behalf, as this declaration of Little Bobbles appeared to him, he was touched by the honest fellow's evident sincerity.

"I heartily wish, Bobbles," he said with a deep sigh, "that my dear Miss Nina had one or two friends as sincere as you to help and assist her now."

Little Bobbles dried his eyes, and grew pink with joy. He interpreted Peter's words to mean approval of his suit, but was too nervous and bashful to make a direct reply.

He glanced at his watch.

"Nearly seven," said he. "Time I was at the circus. But I'll run round to the police-station and have the bills out at once. 'Lost, a Young Girl, answers to the name of Nina!' That's the sort of thing, isn't it, Peter? Do you think a reward of five pounds in very large letters would be enough, or ought I to offer more, and should I say, 'Lost, Stolen, or Strayed?'"

At this moment a faint tapping is heard at the outer door. Little Bobbles, plunging into the

passage, tears open the street-door, and to his inexpressible delight sees Nina standing outside.

A sadly different Nina to the bright lovely girl who had burst upon his sight the previous evening.

She stands before him now, pale, sorrow-stricken, and weary, a very shadow of her former self, upon the threshold of the door.

"Thank Heaven!" piously ejaculated Peter, raising his hands to heaven. "Thank Heaven the danger is over, and you are safe once more."

"Yes, Peter," says Nina, looking round with a haggard, exhausted look. "Thank Heaven I am safe. The danger is over, but my heart is broken."

Then as she stoops to take the old man's hand, her head turns giddy, her step falters, and she falls fainting at his feet.

## CHAPTER XV.

### LITTLE BOBBLES SUMMONS UP COURAGE.

"QUITE enough to make her faint away too. Poor dear lamb!" says fussy Mrs. Bantam; "but there, master, you're no call to feel alarm. It's just a faint and nothing more."

The good little woman evidently knows what she is about, and by-and-by, when she has coaxed Nina into taking some simple warm restorative Peter has the satisfaction of seeing her sufficiently recovered to set his mind comparatively at rest.

Then she confides her sorrows to the only friend now left her, and what can the old man do but advise her return to Mr. and Madame Brayson? The poor girl shudders at the thought.

Little Bobbles has gone long ago to fulfil his

professional duties at the circus, taking with him the welcome news of Nina's return.

He passes the money-box, that awful shrine, where sits the imperious Madame Giuseppina with feelings of misgiving and alarm.

To his surprise she returns his timid greeting with courteous affability.

"I'm jolly glad Nina's turned up," says Jemima, who is standing at the box-entrance, cracking nuts with her teeth and pelting the passers-by with the shells. "That Janet wants looking after, she did make a mess of our dinner to-day! She must have ate the jam herself instead of putting it in the pudding; and that's why she turned me out of the kitchen so spiteful!"

Here "Master Jimmy" made a desperate dive down the narrow passage, leading to the stables, nearly upsetting Lisetta, to the latter's great disgust.

"Master Jimmy" having showered her nut-shells somewhat too plentifully on a butcher boy in hob-nailed boots, who happened to be passing at the time, the young gentleman immediately commenced retaliating with the aforesaid boots,

besides addressing a choice vocabulary of epithets to his fair assailant, who thereupon beat a hasty retreat.

When at length the dreaded time arrived for Nina to return to Madame Giuseppina's roof, Little Bobbles begged hard to accompany her.

Then Nina remembers that she has not thanked him for his well-meant present, and her very mention of it brings tears into Little Bobbles's eyes.

"Don't speak of it, miss, pray don't," he says, in a very melancholy way. "I'm glad you liked it!"

"I fear your kind thought for me brought you annoyance and trouble, Mr. Bobbles?"

"Oh dear no, miss, not at all," replied he briskly. "Mr. Brayson was very free and nice when he came about you yesterday afternoon. He had half a bottle of whisky," concluded Little Bobbles with a deep sigh.

"I'm glad you did not get into trouble through any fault of mine."

"Oh, miss! I'm sure we'd everyone of us be proud to get into trouble to serve you," says

Little Bobbles excitedly. "At least, I know I would; but there, perhaps after all I'm not of much use. Only, me and Peter was talking about you last night, if you please, miss, and Peter said you'd never be happy now until you'd got someone to protect you, for that you was a poor, unprotected young female!"

Nina's nerves are far from strong, and these ill-judged words bring tears into her eyes.

Little Bobbles immediately begins to cry too, and the fine speeches he intended making all vanish from his mind.

"Don't cry, Miss Nina," he implores most pitifully. "Oh, Miss Nina, please don't cry! If you had a husband now, he'd be able to protect you; and you needn't go back at all to the Braysons, or ever ride again in their circus, if you didn't want to. And oh! Miss Nina, I've been a considering and considering that if you'd only be so very good, and kind, and obliging, so gracious and condescending as to have me for a husband, why, you don't know how happy it would make me."

Nina looks up through her tears at the grotesque little figure at her side.

Everything in her life is now a prolonged discord. A grim irony is making a bitter mockery of her hopes, exerting its evil influence even on those with whom she is in any way connected.

"I know I can't speak up for myself," continues Little Bobbles, overwhelmed with shame and confusion, "but I'm sure, if you'd the pick over the whole world, Miss Nina, you'd never find anyone who'd love you better, or work for you more willingly than me; and then we should do first-rate together in business. I've been offered an engagement in London for six pounds a week—that's very good considering I don't find horses—and a 'ben.' besides. I've saved a little too, Miss Nina, and if you'd come with me we could get ten pounds a week easily, and I'd do all the work, you shouldn't spoil your pretty little fingers. You should have a grand 'pianer,'" continued the little clown with a sudden burst of inspiration, "the biggest and the loudest I could get—if the room was only large enough

to hold it—and you should do nothing else but play and sing all day long if you liked, Miss Nina, for I know you're fond of music."

Poor Nina! What agony she was in during this long speech of Little Bobbles!

That saying of Crosby St. Clair haunted her like a vampire dream.

Was the only honourable way to freedom from her present life of slavery a marriage with someone in the same calling and profession as herself?

Oh! it was too dreadful to contemplate. Yet this poor little man honestly meant every word he said.

But what could she say to him in reply? She did her best to console him with a few kind words. Nevertheless, Little Bobbles had a dim foreboding that his suit was not quite favourably received.

But having blundered so far, he thought he might as well go on blundering a little more.

"I don't ask you to love me, Miss Nina, indeed I don't, not just at first. I know there's nothing at all in me for a beautiful young lady

like you to love, only perhaps by-and-by, when you saw how I'd try to do everything to make your life happy, and let you have all the money to spend yourself, and be quite content if you only gave me just one little smile in return—then, Miss Nina, I think maybe you'd begin to pity me a little, just a very little; and after that you might even begin to love me. Miss Nina—don't you think you might perhaps begin to love me? I wouldn't ask for much; I'd be satisfied with such a little, I would indeed. I've saved over two hundred pounds by 'bens.,' so that I could buy you all kinds of fine clothes when we went to London. And oh, Miss Nina," added the poor little fellow, totally breaking down and bursting into tears, "I hope you'll excuse all I've been saying; but if you would just give me a trial—sob—sob—just to see if I wouldn't do all I say—sob—sob—and a great deal more too, if I only knew how—sob—sob. For I'm sure, Miss Nina, you'll never find anybody who'll protect you as faithfully as I would—sob—sob—though, maybe, I ain't much to look at."

Here Little Bobbles grew quite unintelligible and inarticulate, sniffling and sobbing to an alarming extent, rubbing his little snub nose and his small red eyes assiduously with his coloured cotton pocket-handkerchief.

What was Nina to do?

A few weeks ago she would have been inexpressibly amused and diverted at such a comical declaration. Now, the anguish to which she was herself a prey made her tender and considerate even to this poor weak-minded little fellow, sobbing and crying beside her as if his very heart would break.

"I don't suppose—indeed, I'm quite sure I shall never marry," she says at last, with a deep sigh. "But you really mustn't cry about it, indeed you mustn't," she goes on, exactly the same as if she were trying to comfort a schoolboy who had been beaten by a bigger one, or had had his marbles or toffy stolen. "Let us shake hands, Mr. Bobbles, and we'll be better friends than ever; only we will never again allude to

this subject, if you please. And now I must say good-bye, for you see I'm close to the door."

They had, in fact, arrived within a few yards of Mr. Brayson's house; and Nina, shaking hands hurriedly, but cordially, with poor disappointed Little Bobbles, ran lightly over the road, and disappeared within the garden gate.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### SUNSHINE AFTER RAIN.

In spite of all she had so recently undergone, it was with a feeling of absolute relief that Nina found herself once more in the overgrown and neglected garden that surrounded the gloomy-looking stone-built house occupied by Mr. Brayson on the occasion of his present visit to Tayside.

In her eagerness to escape from Little Bobbles, and his very unexpected and ludicrous declaration, she completely overlooked the dismal fact that she was returning to the house of bondage, under even more disadvantageous circumstances than before.

As she drew near the house, she heard the loud rude tones of Jemima's voice, speaking apparently

to some strange visitor; and she presently caught sight of a tall gentleman of clerical appearance, who was standing at the hall-door with his back turned to Nina, as she came up the garden path.

"Master Jimmy" was arrayed in full Dick Turpin back garden costume, and she further held in one hand one of Mr. Brayson's long circus whips, which she amused herself by cracking as a sort of obbligato accompaniment to her conversation. In the other was a very sour-looking green apple from which at intervals she took huge bites.

"I tell you there ain't none of them at home, so it isn't the least bit of good your sticking there talking to Janet," vociferated the tomboy with her mouth full.

"Perhaps you will leave your name and address, sir," commenced Janet, "madame will be sorry——"

"Madame'll be nothing of the sort, so don't get telling stories," interrupted Jemima, throwing away the core of her green apple perilously near to where the visitor was standing.

"I think the better plan will be for me to call

again," said the gentleman, turning away from the door.

"I say," shouted the rude girl, dancing backwards and forwards and cracking her long whip, "if you want to see ma so very particular, you'd best come down to the circus this evening; you'll find us all there, and I'll pass you in. It's about the best 'show' you'll have seen in your life I should think, so you just take my 'tip,'" finished Master Jimmy with a clumsy pirouette.

"Hullo! why, here is Nina, I do declare!" she began again, turning her whole attention to her new victim, and darting towards her, for in executing her pirouette Jemima had all at once become conscious of Nina's appearance on the scene.

"And so you've actually thought it worth your while to come back at last," she began in a disagreeable mocking voice. "Let's have a good look at you and see if you have grown." Here she pulled Nina rudely round, pretending to scrutinise her up and down. "But really I'd have stayed away a little longer if I'd been you," she

continued jeeringly. "You haven't given us half a fright after all."

The visitor at the first mention of Nina's name had turned quickly round, advancing to meet her, and in him she recognises at once the gentleman who has been staying at Clairvale, the elder brother of her cruel lover, Caryll Gordon.

"Oh, so you know him, do you, Nina?" says Master Jimmy with a contemptuous toss of her head. "But look here, you can't ask him in while ma's out, you know."

But Gerald tells Nina that his errand is important, and concerns herself alone—that he comes on behalf of his brother Caryll; and Nina, assuming to herself more authority than is her wont, forthwith conducts him to the sitting-room, from which "Master Jimmy" finds herself quietly but effectually excluded.

Then, with an anxiously beating heart and a cruel feeling of apprehension, Nina takes her seat, some little distance from Gerald, and waits patiently for him to explain the motives of his coming.

In a few gentle words, Gerald tries to reassure her, telling her the purpose of his visit is not to distress her or to re-awaken painful feelings in her mind, but that he has come to plead his brother's cause with her.

"There is no cause to plead," says Nina sadly. "All is at an end between us. It was my fault, mine alone," she hastens to explain, for she cannot bear to think of anyone speaking in reproof or blame of him she still loves so well. "I ought not to have listened to him; but I was ignorant, I did not know I was doing wrong. I did not know until it was too late that he was so far above me, that I was so very much beneath him."

With all her sweetness of disposition, she cannot keep a tinge of bitterness from her tone as she says these last few words, her eyes cast down, for she would hide from him, Caryll's brother, the tears that tremble in her eyes.

"It is at his own urgent request that I am here to-day," Gerald proceeds with gentle earnestness. "I do not wish to excuse or palliate his

conduct in any way; he attempted to do you a cruel wrong in his mad unreasoning passion, which at the moment blinded him to the full extent of the evil nature of his offence. But, my dear young lady, he is unfeignedly sorry and repentant for the severe trial and temptation to which through him you have been subjected. He wishes me to carry back to him the glad news of your forgiveness, and the welcome assurance that you will put faith in him once more."

"Forgiveness! My forgiveness!" repeats Nina, with a miserable sense that her wounds are being cruelly reopened by this clerical brother of Caryll's. "He has that; he knows that I forgive him, surely he knows that. But trust in him again, how can I? I love him still; I feel I must love him to the very end of my life, but how can I put trust in him again? Oh, sir!" she cries, turning to Gerald, and striving bravely to keep back her tears, "do you indeed know all? And, knowing all, can you further plead his cause?"

"My dear child," replies Gerald with a sad, patient smile, "that is the especial reason of my visit. Listen to me calmly, if I venture to suggest that, misled in your turn by a false pride, you are seeking to inflict upon yourself unnecessary torture. Who is there among us that has never sinned, that at some time or other of his life has not deeply offended, not only against the Divine laws, but against his neighbour also? If Heaven pardons and freely reinstates the truly contrite sinner, shall we, so much in need of forgiveness ourselves, arrogantly deny it to a fellow creature?"

"What would you have? What do you ask?" inquires Nina faintly, quite at a loss to perceive the drift of his argument.

"I do not ask a barren forgiveness," says Gerald, pleading for Caryll as fervently as if it were for himself, "a forgiveness of mere words, but a forgiveness that will nobly consent to trust once more in my brother's truthfulness and honour."

"It cannot be," says Nina mournfully,

shaking her head, "everything must be at an end between us, all is for ever past and gone——"

"Not so," returns Gerald gravely; "he would repair his error, undo the wrong. By my mouth he beseeches you to listen to him once more, to believe in the sincerity of his love, to consent to become his wife."

"His wife," repeats Nina, musing sadly. "Yes, I remember he said it even then, but it was a feeling of mistaken generosity that prompted him. He looks upon me in his heart as his inferior; it must be so indeed, for I am poor, I should be no fitting wife for him, in time he would repent his folly, would tire of me, would even cease to love me."

Then rising from her seat as if the interview were too painful to be further prolonged, she proceeds with forced calmness:

"It is better for me to part from him now, knowing that he still loves me, than one day to endure the agony of feeling I had outgrown his love, whilst mine for him must last until I die."

"My dear child," says Gerald, rising too, and taking her hand as she turns wearily away to hide the large tears gathering in her eyes, "your own heart is not altogether free from bitterness. You are trying to deceive yourself in saying you are so much my brother's inferior; you do not really think so in your heart."

Nina turns quickly round with a haughty and almost offended air; but the mild, gentle, pleading look in Gerald's eyes subdues her hasty spirit, and the words she had intended to utter die unspoken on her lips.

"You are not his inferior," Gerald proceeds calmly, "he does not think you so, and most assuredly I do not. A virtuous woman brings her husband a gift of true unfailing happiness; therefore in his name and for his sake, I ask you from my heart to consent to be my sister, and his true and loving wife."

Nina stands as if rooted to the spot, Gerald's words seem sounding in her ears with a vague murmuring sound like the waves of the distant ocean; all seems suddenly confused around her,

she feels as if she were in a bewildering dream. Her hand still lies passively in Gerald's, but yet she cannot find a word to speak, her mind in its perplexity refuses even to think.

Then Gerald looks down on the fair face before him, comprehending fully the tumult of emotions pent up within her heart.

"My mission is accomplished," he says in his gentle, persuasive way; "I feel I may return with the welcome news of your consent, and in the event of my interview being successful, my brother requested me to give you this letter."

Nina stretches out her hand eagerly to receive it. A letter from him, another letter to replace that dear one now lost in the myriad waves of the troubled ocean. But even then, midway she stops and lifts her eyes with their sweet, wistful gaze to his.

"You are sure I shall do right? You are sure it will be for his good?" she asks, a faint blush of re-awakening hope dawning on her cheek.

"I feel sure you will exert an influence for good over his life," replies Gerald, looking steadily

down into her truthful eyes; "in virtue of my sacred calling, and as his elder brother, I solemnly repeat my firm and honest conviction."

"It is enough, you have decided me."

Then she takes the letter from Gerald, and raising his hand to her lips kisses it reverently and tenderly.

"Good-bye, Nina, my sister soon to be," he says, pressing her hand; "God bless you, my child, and may your future be bright and happy."

## CHAPTER XVII.

### FLIGHT.

Two days and nights have elapsed since Gerald Gordon's interview with Nina, and it is night once more.

Night at the sea-side—in a bustling little town distant some hundreds of miles from Tayside.

A straggling, irregularly built place, almost shut in by high cliffs and quaint, old-fashioned fortifications, to which have been added new-fangled modern improvements and innovations.

On one side, grandly situated and commanding, a full view of the town beneath, and sea beyond, rises an ancient castle dating from feudal times; while numerous handsome and spacious mansions, hotels, and other edifices are jumbled incongruously

together among the meagre-looking streets and houses of the town proper.

A town of no little importance either, constituting, as it does, one of the main arteries of traffic of this busy little island home of ours; for through it day and night are constantly passing and repassing crowds of ever-wandering strangers and pilgrims, crowds of idle pleasure-seekers, frivolous butterflies of fashion, jostling one another as they eagerly hurry on in the course of their journey through life.

Alongside the noble pier lies the mail-packet that in less than an hour will steam away for the coast of France.

Already there are some signs of activity on board, and some passengers, though these mostly disappear to regions below immediately they set foot on deck.

The night is calm and fine; dark, for the young crescent moon has not yet risen; there is little wind, though the air is piercingly keen.

In the far-off darkness beyond the pier, the straggling lights, dotted about here and there

along the esplanade and through the winding streets, convey an odd impression, as if the demure old town lay silently watching and lazily winking and blinking at the many uncanny doings in which the mail service has played a prominent if unconscious part for many a long and weary time past.

Winking now at some unprincipled absconder trying to escape with his embezzled spoil.

Winking again, perchance, at some fearful offender against the laws alike of Heaven and earth, rushing red-handed from the scene of his crime with guilty flight, to save his already justly forfeited life.

Winking at lighter sins of reckless lovers and lightly won dames, eagerly seeking happiness in their mad, unreasoning way, little thinking how bitterly they will both repent their fatal error ere many fleeting moons have waxed and waned.

Winking slyly, too, at the young bride and bridegroom, speeding swiftly over the restless sea, to wear out the seemingly anticipated tedium of the honeymoon in foreign lands, among strangers,

in sight-seeing, bustle, and excitement, welcoming every additional attraction, occupation, and amusement that may help to pass away the time.

And still the weird old town goes on, quietly winking its many twinkling red eyes as sleepily and lazily as ever.

But now on the pier, and in the direction of the railway-station, there is unmistakable excitement and commotion.

The mail is due within a few minutes, and the boat is only waiting until it has received the coming passengers to steam away for Calais.

But soon is heard the hoarse, hissing snort of the great iron monster as it glides like a gigantic snake majestically along the pier, down to the very spot where the boat is in readiness to receive its freight.

Business passengers mostly to-night, sturdy-looking men, toughened by constant exposure to the weather, well wrapped up, abrupt, surly, and taciturn, all busily engaged looking after their own comfort and convenience, anxious to secure the most advantageous quarters for themselves,

not caring a dump how ill at ease and uncomfortable their fellow-travellers may be, provided their own ease and comfort be attained.

There are one or two lady-passengers, possibly compelled by business to undertake this night journey, perhaps travelling with all speed to visit some sick relative; and, last of all, a small group of three, of a very different type to those who have gone before.

The first is a lady, warmly, even luxuriously wrapped in rich dark clinging furs. As the light from the adjacent lamp falls on her slight, graceful figure, you can see that she is very young and very beautiful.

By her side, looking down on her with a proud, protecting glance, stands a tall aristocratic-looking man.

The third person forming this little group is of clerical appearance, and his pale classically-cut features look somewhat pinched and worn.

The lady speaks first.

"It has come at last," she says, with a little regretful sigh. "We must really say good-bye

now." And as she speaks, she disengages her arm from that of the gentleman standing by her side.

"Good-bye, dear old fellow!" says this last, grasping the other warmly by the hand.

"If anything could, by any possibility, have added to the debt of gratitude I already owe you, your goodness and unselfishness in this instance would have done so. Good-bye, Gerald! God bless you for your kindness to myself and my sweet darling here!"

"Good-bye, dear Gerald" murmurs the lady softly; and he whom she calls Gerald feels a tear fall lightly on his hand as she puts hers in his to say farewell.

He bends over the winsome face, upturned to his, eloquent in its mingled expression of regret at parting, and its sweet shy look of love and hope.

One kiss he presses on her brow, a kiss of solemn, sad farewell, fondly he clasps the tiny hand that lies in his, with feelings she cannot guess. Has not his brother won the love and affection of the only being who had power to touch the key-note

of his heart, and set it vibrating with, alas! tangled harmony since she is not for such as he.

"Good-bye Nina, dear child, my sister now," he says with affectionate tenderness. "May God in his merciful goodness ever bless and watch over you!"

And then, before she can well tell how she came there, she finds herself on board the boat, fast speeding across the "silver streak," with Caryll, now her husband, by her side.

One volume of her life ended, for ever done with; another, with its pages unfolding at her feet.

What destiny is written upon its yet unturned leaves? Will all be bright and promising as now?

Oh! yes. She tells herself, for what can harm her now? Is she not happy in her love, is she not Caryll's wife at last?

Surely in mercy is the future hidden from our eyes!

The bustle and excitement on the pier are over, and it is lonely, desolate, and dreary.

Still Gerald stands looking into the thick darkness of the waters which are bearing from him for evermore the two most precious things the earth holds for him—his brother and his lost love, his brother's wife.

Doubly bereft, doubly forsaken, there he stands, listening to the mournful plashing of the waves.

The bitterness of parting is over, the strongest link in the chain that binds him still to earth is broken. Before she again sets foot upon these English shores full well he knows his course will be run. All earthly joys and sorrows he will have left far behind, for he will have entered into his eternal and heavenly rest!

Gazing, and still gazing into the solemn blackness of the night he stands murmuring heartfelt prayers for her, his loved one's happiness and well-being.

And still the dull old town lies winking and blinking its many twinkling red eyes throughout its sleepy length along the shore, adding another and a nobler secret to the many dark ones already on its list.

The secret of the untold love, the unselfish sacrifice, of a true brother's heart.

God speed the travellers on their way. They have climbed to the topmost summit of their earthly paradise, and we will leave them, for a short time at least, in full enjoyment of it.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### A PROFESSIONAL BEAUTY.

A BOUDOIR in that pre-eminently aristocratic quarter styled Belgravia.

Not situate, however, in any of those grand and princely mansions with which this favoured locality abounds; the boudoir, to which the progress of the story now leads us, being contained in a house of meaner pretension and much smaller size; such as may be noticed in any of those monotonously tedious places, terraces, and streets, that permeate and intersect the very heart of this presumably exclusive neighbourhood.

A small apartment, tastefully arranged, where silken hangings with inner clouds of soft creamy lace, hesitatingly admit the feeble rays of the

November sun; where pier glasses and mirrors of quaintly mediæval design occupy every available space upon the walls—where a just sufficiency of repose-inviting furniture judiciously disposed, suggests an air of indolent and luxurious ease—and where a dash of colour, glitter, flowers, ferns, and statuettes, the latter in a daring but doubtless strictly classical state of undrapery, combined with a choice collection of old-fashioned china and so-called art-specimens, unite in forming a pleasantly harmonious effect, in which nothing is unduly prominent (except perhaps the mirrors) nothing painfully glaring, or gaudily obtrusive.

A tiny temple, perfect in its way, well suited for the purpose of displaying to the best possible advantage the crowning loveliness of its fair goddess, the reigning beauty of the fashionable world, the Honourable Edelgitha Amyott.

And truly a more perfect specimen of female loveliness was never seen, since Cytherean Venus sprang faultless in grace and beauty from the wild sea foam.

The Honourable Edelgitha is very pale—pale

indeed as might be some beautiful statue just waking from the marble into life, the languid grace of the statue remaining about her still, as though the cold insensate stone had not, as yet, fully blushed into the warm carnation tints of living flesh and blood.

Observe her now, for instance, in her robe of soft ivory white, as she sits, half reclining on a low and quaintly-fashioned couch, cunningly disposed at that precise angle which permits of her seeing her lovely self reflected in the most numerous and varied positions by the surrounding mirrors.

Mark well how artfully the sweeping yet clinging draperies of her wondrously-fashioned costume insinuatingly define the graceful contour of the limbs they seem to hide.

No tinge of colour relieves the trying severity of her attire, save the full clear azure of her languishing blue eyes, the faintly roseate coral of her perfect mouth, and the shimmering pale gold tresses of her wondrous hair, that it has pleased her present fancy to unbind, and which flows in bright luxuriance over her shoulders far below her

waist, sweeping even to the rich Persian carpet at her feet.

Surely, if the possession of matchless beauty, added to the proud consciousness of the universal homage and admiration it unfailingly commands, have the power of conferring happiness, this lovely patrician girl must be twice blessed; and yet the expression of those exquisite features is at this moment hardly one of happiness; it rather bespeaks languid regret or even discontent.

But there is another occupant of the room, a lady of truly regal type and haughtily majestic bearing.

This is the Honourable Edelgitha's mother, the Lady Eaglesworth.

"Only a few short days," she is saying with fond maternal pride, as she sits contemplating her daughter's exceeding loveliness, "and my darling child will be Countess of Hiltoun, wife of one of the richest noblemen in the land, and the most envied, as she is now the most admired, lady in society."

Thus addressed, the fair girl turns momentarily

from her carefully-studied poses and attitudes, reflected in the all-obedient mirrors.

"How fast time flies," remarks she, with a slight shiver and a little murmuring sigh; "and yet it is indeed true; another week will see my marriage a thing of the past."

"Everything so far is really as satisfactory as could be wished," observes Lady Eaglesworth, with a placid smile of self-congratulation. "My suggestions have been treated with due consideration, and in the matter of settlements I am bound to say Lord Hiltoun has been most exemplary. Your *trousseau* also will leave nothing to be desired. Madame Delacour has certainly done her best; her charges are exorbitant, I admit; but it was simply impossible to make better terms with the creature, for it is understood that she is to wait for payment until after your marriage."

"You have arranged everything admirably, mother," says Edelgitha with listless assent.

"I trust I have in every way conscientiously fulfilled my duty as a mother, my dear child," replies Lady Eaglesworth. "I have succeeded

in securing a brilliant position for you; one, Edelgitha, that your girlish inexperience cannot as yet fully realise."

"Perhaps it may be as you say, mother," sighs the fair girl, with a wistful glance at Lady Eaglesworth; "but now that this much-talked-of marriage draws so near, I feel almost to dread it. At times I even think I could wish something might happen to put it off."

"Put it off!" echoes Lady Eaglesworth, elevating her finely-arched eyebrows in mingled consternation and surprise. "Is it possible that my daughter can give utterance to such rebellious and undutiful, such grossly ungrateful, such actually irreligious sentiments as these? For it is nothing short of a positive temptation of Providence, Edelgitha. Your marriage with the Earl of Hiltoun can alone save our credit in the eyes of the world; and yet not a minute ago you coolly tell me—your mother—you wish it could be put off! Have you then so soon forgotten the sacrifices your father and I have made in order to secure your suitable *début* in society—the heavy

additional expenses incidental to your first season in London? And is it not to your rank and influence as Countess of Hiltoun that I look principally for the introduction and ultimate establishment of your younger sister Maude?"

"Dearest mother," interrupts the Honourable Edelgitha with a faint gesture of impatience, "I do not for one moment underrate the importance of my marriage; I have been as eager as you could possibly desire to attain rank and position—in short, to make what the world would call a brilliant match. I intend to become Countess of Hiltoun; yet standing on the very brink of what may prove a precipice, is it so very unnatural that I should express regret at leaving the shelter of my father's roof, or feel some little hesitation at the thought of exchanging my home for one that will be new and strange to me?"

"Maidenly reserve, Edelgitha," oracularly observes the worldly-minded matron, "is doubtless an effective sentiment when judiciously exercised for the benefit of our friends, but it should never

be unduly indulged in private, and in the present instance not at all."

"But consider, mother, I know so little about Lord Hiltoun," urges the beautiful Edelgitha.

"You know everything that is requisite," replies Lady Eaglesworth sternly. "Your future husband is rich, noble, generous to a degree. Rest satisfied with that, and seek to know no more. Believe me, the old story of Bluebeard has a true moral, even in our own time, and wives who are too inquisitive generally end by learning more than is altogether good for their after happiness and peace."

The Honourable Edelgitha sighs, and turning to her mirrors, glances mechanically at the lovely form reflected there.

"And then his age!" she resumes presently, as if speaking to herself; "he is even older than my own father."

"The very prime of life," remarks Lady Eaglesworth with some asperity.

"He is so formal, so stately, so precise, so antiquated, and so——"

"Rich," conclusively remarks Lady Eaglesworth, putting the finishing stroke to her daughter's observations, her tone and emphasis, as she mentions this last and all-important qualification, implying that, in her own estimation and that of the world at large, the possession of riches covereth, like charity, a multitude of sins.

"Rich—so rich!—it is always that," exclaims Edelgitha pettishly.

"And what could possibly be better, my dear child? Wealth is the key-note to all real happiness, enjoyment, and power—in this world at least. It is the only test that can stand the wear and tear of life. With settlements such as yours, not to mention the rank and position this alliance will confer, every properly-trained girl would be content."

"But, mother," says the beautiful Edelgitha with a faint protest, "I fear I shall never be able to love him."

"Love!" exclaims Lady Eaglesworth with as near an approach to anger as the correct rules of perfect breeding will allow. "Who talks of love?

It is marriage we are discussing, Edelgitha, and not love. Love is a plebeian sentiment, essentially vulgar, and fitted only for the inferior classes, and even these do not seem able to make much of it. It is an unmanageable distemper breaking out in the most unaccountable directions. A flame that burns brightly enough just at first, but soon dies out, leaving nothing tangible behind, nothing but dust and ashes."

"Surely there is a love far different to this?" faintly urges the lovely girl.

"Yes, in poetry, pictures, and romantic unnatural fictions, and in improperly directed minds," replies her mother severely. "But in real life, in the ordinary common-sense view of things, love is an error; nay, even worse, it is often a positive calamity."

"Not that, surely, for in our position in life some few love and are happy in their mutual choice. Did not Lucy Vavasour marry her cousin, a case of love at first sight?"

"A case of money and preserving the family estates," retorts Lady Eaglesworth, with as near

an approach to a sneer as a well-bred lady can express. "And besides, they have not been married six months. Think rather of the unhappy scandal of the past season, which may perhaps end in bringing noble names through the mire of the Divorce Court!"

"Poor Lady Hartridge!" sighs Edelgitha.

"Poor Lady Hartridge!" echoes Lady Eaglesworth in freezing tones of horror. "You seem strangely to forget yourself! Am I to understand, Edelgitha, that you actually condescend to pity a woman who has so grossly offended against the rules and customs of society?"

Edelgitha gives a deep sigh and casts down her eyes.

"Still, mother," she ventures timidly, "I often think love must be the only thing in life worth living for."

Lady Eaglesworth's face expresses absolute consternation at this open rebellion on the part of her daughter.

"Edelgitha, I beg I may hear no more of this," she says in tones of icy severity. "You force me

most unwillingly to recall your very marked and imprudent flirtation during the past season with that young detrimental Captain Gordon."

"Is he a detrimental, mother?" persists the young girl, while a faint tinge of colour glows upon her cheek. "You know he will be very rich some day, and besides, he belongs to a good old family, distantly connected with nobility."

"You seem well informed, truly," says the offended matron in politely sarcastic tones. "The Caryll Gordons may possibly be connected with nobility, but the connection is far too remote to permit of its being recognised by me. I am, however, aware that on the mother's side this Captain Gordon is intimately connected with a most objectionable class. With regard to the fortune he is to inherit, I have heard it stated that in accordance with the low cunning displayed by such people, the brewer tied his money up in some complicated way, thus rendering it impossible for Captain Gordon to touch a penny of it until he becomes six-and-twenty years of age. As a natural consequence, the foolish young man

is over head and ears in debt, forestalling his inheritance, and safe in the clutches of a troop of money-lenders."

"You are severe, mother."

"No, Edelgitha, I am only just. Your childish wilfulness in openly encouraging the marked attentions of this young man has already damaged your *prestige* in society. It was fortunate that Lord Hiltoun had heard nothing of your imprudence. Had I been weak enough to have permitted the indulgence of your silly preference, your father would have been irretrievably ruined, your sister's future prospects completely wrecked, and you yourself would have outgrown your passing fancy for Captain Gordon long before he virtually had any money to call his own. So much for what you are pleased to call love!"

"And yet—at the altar, in the sight of Heaven, a wife solemnly vows to love——"

"My dear child," hastily interrupts Lady Eaglesworth, "the acknowledged form of our Church of England marriage-service must not be taken in its literal sense—many old-fashioned

crudities still exist in both our legal and religious ceremonies, relics of a less enlightened age, to which nevertheless from custom we conform. Great reformations in these matters of late years have taken place; but much undoubtedly still remains to be done. Meanwhile we respect the antiquity of the rite and repeat the prescribed and orthodox words; but, my dear child, nobody in the present day would think of applying them in their literal sense; to do so would be both pedantic and absurd. Depend upon it, esteem and respect for a husband answers far better than love, and what wife could possibly fail to respect and esteem a person of Lord Hiltoun's enormous wealth?"

Edelgitha turns uneasily upon her couch, sweeping her bright hair impatiently from her brow, and leaning her graceful head upon her hand.

So absorbed is she in her own thoughts that she forgets all her carefully-studied attitudes; indeed it is now some considerable time since she has glanced at her reflection in the many looking-glasses placed around.

Lady Eaglesworth waits a few seconds as if anticipating a reply. Then rising, she kisses Edelgitha on the forehead, leaving her to her own thoughts, convinced that however severe may have been her reproof, she has only been considering her daughter's welfare in administering it.

As the door closes upon Lady Eaglesworth, Edelgitha starts up, taking from her bosom a small packet containing a portrait, cut from an ordinary *carte de visite*, that for convenience of disposal she has fitted into an old-fashioned miniature case.

This portrait she kisses repeatedly, then carefully replacing it in her breast, she lets her head fall upon her hands and bursts into a torrent of tears.

The miniature case contains no portrait of her affianced husband, the Earl of Hiltoun. It is the likeness of Captain Gordon that she hides so carefully in that soft nest.

Nevertheless, when evening comes the Honourable Edelgitha betrays no sign of the emotion she has so recently experienced.

Surpassingly lovely, graceful and statuesque as ever, she appears in a costume of mediæval design which to all save she would be most trying and unbecoming.

Placid, languidly calm, and composed, she receives compliments and congratulations with graceful well-bred ease, and the proud worldly mother feels prouder still of her peerlessly beautiful child.

Later on that same evening, when mother and daughter are alone, Lord Eaglesworth breaks abruptly into the apartment, strangely disturbed, and looking haggard and distressed.

"I am the bearer of disastrous tidings," he says, pressing his wife's hand with affectionate sympathy; then, turning to his daughter, he continues: "I have just received intelligence of the very sudden death of the Earl of Hiltoun through an accident in the hunting-field. The unfortunate event took place this morning. This is sad news for all of us, but mostly for you, poor child!"

A bitter smile of mingled scorn and contempt

plays momentarily upon Lady Eaglesworth's fine features, as, relinquishing her husband's hand, she turns almost fiercely to her child, saying in cold measured tones:

"This morning you expressed a wish that your marriage might be put off. Be satisfied, Edelgitha. Your wish is granted now!"

## CHAPTER XIX.

### IN FOREIGN LANDS.

Florence, beautiful Florence! crowned with ever blooming flowers, sweet living smiles of Nature.

Favoured city of the past and present! Glorious in historic annals of a bygone age, glorious still in all the exceeding wealth of Nature's choicest gifts.

Beautiful always, but most of all in new-born blushing spring-time.

Whilst icy winter holds fast bound in frozen fetters the cities of less-favoured northern climes, all here is bathed in sunny smiles of genial but not overpowering warmth.

Flowers spring forth everywhere in rich and prodigal profusion, while the sun, lingering lovingly

over the beautiful city, tips with living gold its stately towers and cupolas, its many palaces and domes.

In a balcony attached to one of these ancient palaces—truly magnificent relics of former grandeur—screened from sight by the flowing draperies of the brightly coloured awning, sits a lady, young and beautiful, dressed with exquisite taste, gazing pensively at the fair scene before her.

Rare jewels flash their mimic lightnings from the costly ornaments she wears.

At her feet, on a velvet cushion, lies a little dog, curled up in selfish and luxurious ease.

Surely it cannot be our ill-used little friend Dido that we meet again under such peculiarly favoured circumstances?

And this elegantly-dressed lady, so truly aristocratic in appearance, is this then Nina, our little circus heroine of former days?

Yes, even so. Nina herself. Brighter, more beautiful than when we saw her last, now fully ripened into as exquisite an example of female loveliness as painter e'er portrayed or poet sung.

A few months since and she was still a child, simple and artless, knowing nothing of the world; never having seen anything beyond the narrow limits of the family with whom since earliest childhood she had been associated.

Not ignorant in the sense of want of education, thanks to her mother's early care the thirst for knowledge and improvement having been carefully instilled into her young mind, and yet most ignorant of all those snares and pitfalls with which the path of life is so deceitfully beset, which innocence of evil had, notwithstanding, proved her surest safeguard in the hour of her brief yet bitter trial.

But now the poetical intelligence, the natural refinement of her nature, have burst into full bloom with tropical suddenness and vigour, and difficult indeed would it be to recognise in the graceful and accomplished lady before us the little sylph who, scarce eighteen months ago, had bounded lightly into the arena of Mr. Brayson's circus.

Does Caryll Gordon's wife, surrounded by all

the elegancies of luxurious enjoyment, and basking in the warm sunshine of her husband's love, ever cast her thoughts back to days now past and gone ?

Have new experiences, anticipations, and delights driven all other recollections from her mind ?

Oh, surely not, for Nina's affectionate and generous nature is one not easily spoilt, even by that most crucial of all tests, sudden and unexpectedly acquired prosperity.

Of her secret marriage and subsequent flight, only Peter had at the time been informed.

Nevertheless, she had forgotten none of her old friends.

She had written repeatedly to Peter, sending him many little *souvenirs* from the various places she had visited, all of which had been duly answered and acknowledged by the faithful old servant, or rather by Little Bobbles at Peter's dictation, the old man being quite unable since his unfortunate accident to hold a pen.

Poor Little Bobbles! How he had cried and

whimpered, and nearly broken that fond, foolish heart of his, when he found that his adored and idolised Miss Nina did not smile upon his suit.

During his performance at the circus he was still in the same dolefully lachrymose condition, uttering his "wheezes" in such a plaintively remonstrative manner that the audience, not being in the secret, positively screamed with laughter at this new drollery on the part of their favourite clown.

Then followed the news of Nina's marriage and subsequent flight, news which fell like a thunderbolt upon the Brayson family, who were at last compelled to acknowledge the value and importance of the treasure they had lost.

But the nine days' wonder ceases, the time wears on, and the Braysons and their circus are still pursuing the same old beaten track upon this very evening that Nina, or Mrs. Ainsleigh as she is now called, is sitting in her balcony in the fair city of Florence, gazing on the lovely picture of Italian scenery before her.

Mrs. Ainsleigh! Why not Mrs. Gordon, since that is Caryll's name?

Simply because it has pleased Caryll Gordon to assume his mother's name while travelling on the Continent; and Nina is unaware that there is anything unusual in his so doing.

And what of Caryll? Is he happy and contented in his choice, or does he repent his bargain?

The days are early yet, and his first wild passion of desire is not fully satiated with the knowledge of possession.

Nevertheless, during the period of their stay in Florence, Caryll had seemed persistently to avoid being seen with Nina in public.

And why?

Because the same cowardly fear of the world's censure and contempt that prompted his unworthy conduct at the first avowal of his love has crept again with crafty stealthiness into his heart, threatening to stifle the promptings of his better nature.

Bitterly has he felt the stinging sarcasms and sneers of society respecting his mother's birth, and

now he weakly dreads their more than renewal, when it shall be made known to all the world that he has made a quondam circus-girl his wife ?

Unfortunately he had lost the support of his brother's clearer judgment and advice, for Gerald did not long survive his brother's marriage.

Scarcely a cloud has yet arisen on the fair horizon of Nina's wedded life ; and only once has she had cause to feel a pang of even momentary uneasiness.

The occasion which gave rise to it happened in the following manner.

Nina's circle of friends and acquaintances in Florence is necessarily limited.

It includes, however, a certain Contessa Angiolina Sforza-Visconti, as she is pleased to style herself, an exceedingly attractive lively little lady, supposed to be descended from two of the most noble and ancient Italian families.

The Contessa Sforza-Visconti is a widow, living in very elegant style with an elderly relative, an aunt, or something of the kind, whose duty it is to play propriety, and act the part of duenna to her pretty niece.

Now, the Contessa Angiolina had such engaging manners that she could almost have fascinated a stone hippogriff off its pedestal, had it so pleased her; needless then to say that she had little difficulty in ingratiating herself into the affections of the generous-minded, warm-hearted Nina.

Caryll rather encouraged the friendship of the contessa, well pleased to think she had found a friend in every way so desirable and convenient as the brilliant little Florentine, in whose society she will be able to amuse and occupy her time during the many periods of his absence.

One day as Nina is glancing at the announcement of a grand new opera to be given shortly at the Pergola, she notices, to her astonishment and surprise, that her old circus-master's sister, the Signora Giuditta Carlini, is to sustain the *rôle* of prima donna.

Pleased to indulge Nina so long as it does not interfere with any previous object he may have in view, Caryll obtains a box for the first night's

performance, and duly escorts her to the theatre, accompanied as usual by the contessa.

Arrived there, however, and finding it a bore, Caryll soon contrives a pretence for leaving the two ladies, promising to return before the conclusion of the opera.

Nina, to say the truth, is a little *désillusionnée* after the first act.

The Carlini has doubtless been a fair artiste in her day, but her voice is now worn and uncertain. She is *passée*, and a portly matron of some forty summers, scarcely a fitting representative of the youthful and romantic heroine.

The opera itself, by some second-rate Italian maestro, failing to contain any specially attractive or even original melody, grows monotonous, so that at the conclusion of the first act, Nina feels it an agreeable change to look round the house at the assembled company.

The audience is unusually distinguished, and the theatre this evening presents a most brilliant appearance.

One box in particular, on the same tier as her own, and almost directly opposite, is the centre of much apparent comment and attention.

Of its occupants, Nina can discern two very elegantly dressed ladies: the elder a handsome, majestic woman, fully arrived at maturity, the younger an unusually beautiful girl.

The ladies seem well known to the *élite* of Florentine fashion and nobility, many visitors crowding to the box to pay their respects.

The younger lady rivets Nina's attention at once.

Beautiful indeed is she, a very triumph of loveliness, in which nature and art are blended with irresistible effect.

Her pale-gold hair, in light feathery waves, covers her fair white brow. At the back it is braided tightly round her small apple-shaped head.

Her face and features wear the sweet repose of some classical statue; her limbs are those of a Diana. Her movements have the dignity of a goddess, and her diaphanous robe of subdued

tint brings her wondrous beauty into still greater relief.

Nina can hardly take her eyes from the lovely vision opposite. It seems to possess an indescribable fascination for her; albeit the impression produced is not altogether pleasing—indeed, were she weak enough to put faith in presentiments, she could almost imagine she felt some dim vague presage of evil to come, some mysterious warning, as she continues to gaze on the beautiful stranger opposite.

The Contessa Angiolina, who has been watching Nina intently, turns towards her friend.

"Very beautiful, *carissima*, that young girl yonder?" she says, putting down her opera-glass and coquetting with her fan. The Contessa Angiolina has a bewitchingly pretty hand and arm, and flirts a fan with dangerous skill.

"She is indeed lovely! Do you know who she is?"

"Only that she is English. One sees that at once by her beauty."

And the little Florentine laughs a soft silvery laugh, displaying two perfect rows of small pearly

teeth, as she casts a playful glance in Nina's direction out of her merrily-sparkling black eyes.

"I wonder who she can be?"

"That we shall soon discover, dearest," replies the contessa, recommencing a careful scrutiny of the male portion of the audience. "But it is possible that your husband will already know."

"Do you think so?" inquires Nina, with a slight restless feeling she cannot altogether conceal, and which her shrewd little friend is quick enough instantly to detect.

"But certainly," says the contessa, with an arch smile, "do not the men always find out who the pretty women are? You must not look so horror-stricken. *Viâ, viâ, carina,* we must not begin to be jealous already of our so handsome husband. It is far too soon for that. Besides, is that pretty girl yonder half as beautiful as my own sweet charming Inglesina here?"

And the excitable little contessa starts up with pretty playfulness, depositing a bird-like kiss upon her own sweet charming Inglesina's forehead.

"Also our handsome husband, has he not eyes

of his own?—very fine ones too," persists the irrepressible contessa; "and can he not see that his little Nina is worth so—so—so—many of our beautiful *incognita* over there?"

At this moment the curtain rises upon the second act of the opera.

It is unfortunately more disappointing even than the first. The Carlini, doubtless fatigued with her exertions in the first act, forces her voice, and sings dreadfully out of tune, while the tenor, not much to speak of at the best of times, grows suddenly hoarse.

It is all weariness and vexation of spirit to Nina, who feels it to be a positive relief when at length the curtain falls.

But if her eyes still involuntarily stray in the direction of the opposite box, she is careful to make no further comment to her friend, who, unsuspected by the ingenuous Nina, sits closely watching every movement, letting neither look, gesture, nor expression escape her notice.

The Contessa Angiolina also contrives to observe what very evidently Nina does not.

Among the many crowding to pay homage at the shrine of beauty opposite, is one whom, although keeping well in the background, she at once recognises to be none other than Nina's husband.

The two ladies leave before the conclusion of the opera, which grows more and more tedious, so that when at length Caryll returns at its conclusion, Nina has no opportunity of obtaining a closer glimpse of the beautiful unknown.

Yet twice again she sees her. Once as she is taking her usual daily drive with the contessa, and by daylight Nina thinks she is more lovely than before.

The second time this lovely vision crosses her path is when returning, accompanied by her maid, from morning service at the Protestant church.

Emerging suddenly from an unfrequented lane rather than street, into a wide open place, Nina, to her unspeakable amazement, notices a carriage containing the beautiful lady and her chaperon brought suddenly to a standstill, and a gentle-

man—Caryll! yes, her own husband, Caryll—advancing rapidly towards it.

After dinner, when alone with her husband, Nina hesitatingly alludes to the subject.

"Florence is very full of visitors just now," she commences, with as near approach to careless unconcern as she can assume.

"It is always full, love, at this season of the year," replies Caryll, preparing to light a cigar.

"So many English," continues Nina timidly.

"The greatest disadvantage of the place."

"Do you really think so, Caryll?" asks Nina, looking up quickly. "There are some very nice people here; I thought you might possibly be acquainted with them."

"Indeed! And why so, Nina?"

"There are some very beautiful and very elegant ladies."

"None half so beautiful as my own darling," interrupts Caryll, trying to put an end to the conversation by a little innocent flattery and a kiss.

"One in particular, Caryll; I think the most lovely woman I have ever seen."

"All English ladies seem lovely in contrast with the swarthy Italians."

"But the one I speak of is so supremely beautiful, I should like to know her, Caryll."

A cloud settles upon Caryll's brow.

"My dear Nina," he says with a tinge of sternness in his tone, "you are well aware that I do not wish you to make any English acquaintances until our return to London. To do so would materially affect your approaching *début* in society. Besides, it is not at all probable that I know the lady to whom you allude."

"Oh yes, dear, I am sure you do know her," says Nina with innocent perseverance; "only today I saw you speaking to her as I and Finette were coming home from church."

Caryll starts up suddenly, pushing Nina away from him; and, striding to the balcony beyond, he flings the end of his cigar savagely into the piazza below.

Nina, anxious and alarmed, feeling she has

offended, yet ignorant of her offence, follows him.

"What is it, Caryll? What have I said? Surely you are not angry with me, love?"

As she speaks she raises herself on tiptoe, and putting both arms round his neck, draws down his frowning face to hers with a loving kiss.

He is not proof against this mode of attack just yet, at any rate.

"You foolish child," says he, coaxing her like a petted plaything, his ill-temper entirely vanished, "you are so ignorant of the world, you have so much to learn, my little Nina, that you must really consent to be guided by me, and to wait my time for your introduction into society."

Nina, with another kiss, promises obedience, and there the combat ends, Caryll having so far come off victoriously.

A few days later Nina is driving along the Corso, accompanied by her usual friend and companion, the Contessa Sforza-Visconti.

It is the fashionable time of the day, and the Corso presents a brilliant appearance.

The contessa, sparkling and witty as ever, indiscriminately criticises all the newly-arrived visitors to this gay capital.

All at once, in the very midst of a most diverting little story, Nina notices that her friend's face suddenly changes its gay and smiling expression and grows ghastly pale, while her eyes seem staring with absolute horror at some object on which they appear riveted as if by magic.

The contessa seems indeed on the point of fainting, and Nina, in alarm, has just stopped the carriage with the intention of ordering the coachman to drive back to the hotel, when she is conscious of a voice close at her side disagreeable in tone, but familiar to her ear, addressing her.

Turning rapidly round, to her annoyance and disgust she finds herself suddenly face to face with Crosby St. Clair.

Very servile, even cringing in his manner is he now, abounding in vulgar and to her most distasteful compliments.

Nina has no intention of permitting him to remain by the side of her carriage. Before, how-

ever, she can order the coachman to proceed, the young and lovely girl in whom she feels so much interested passes quickly by.

Crosby St. Clair's eyes follow Nina's glance.

"You know, of course, who she is, Mrs. Ainsleigh?" he observes with a grating emphasis on the last word. "The famous beauty, Lord Eaglesworth's daughter, the Honourable Edelgitha Amyott. Most consummately exquisite, is she not? Strange, indeed, that you should meet her here, for at one time—I am speaking of events that occurred previous to your marriage—at one time rumour coupled her name with that of your husband. But I fear I am detaining you. Good-morning, Mrs. Ainsleigh," concludes Crosby, with an obsequious bow and a slight mocking smile, stepping back as Nina's carriage drives rapidly away; but the expression of pain on her ingenuous face satisfies Crosby that his poisoned arrow has gone fully home, and Nina feels with aching heart that the serpent has at last made entrance into her paradise.

END OF VOL. II.

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